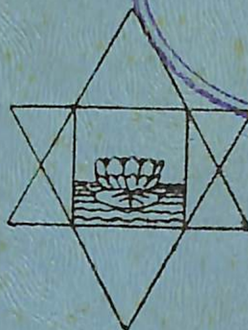
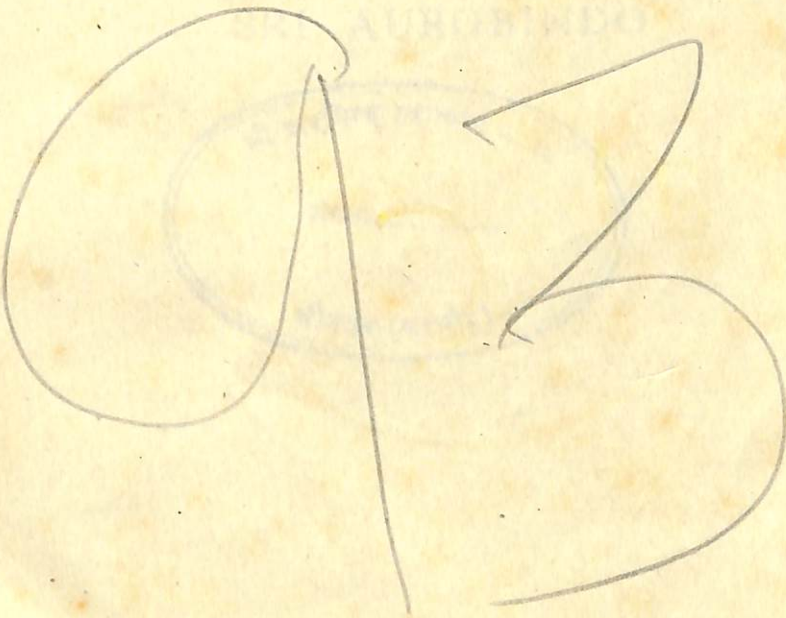


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Some New Letters of SRI AUROBINDO

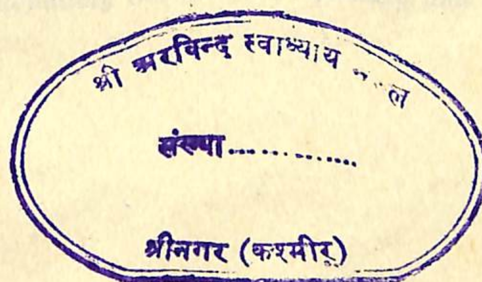
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Some New Letters of SRI AUROBINDO



SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM
PONDICHERRY.

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Over and above various collections under different titles, four volumes of Sri Aurobindo's letters have already appeared—a series of uniform publications by the Sri Aurobindo Circle, Bombay. But there are many letters still to see the light or, to be more spiritually accurate, still to show their light. Here are reprinted from the columns of "Mother India" some of them which were addressed to the Editor, during or after his stay in the Ashram at Pondicherry, and to others connected with Sri Aurobindo's work. The questioner's notes are in each case prefixed in order to give the utmost point to the replies, bring out best the personal touch in them and frame more definitely both their profundity and their humour.

CONTENTS

PAST LIVES AND REBIRTH

(We have various guesses about your previous lives. The other day I happened to ask Nolini whether you were Shakespeare. He was diffident. My own belief is that you have somehow amalgamated all that was precious in those forces that manifested as Homer, Shakespeare, Valmiki, Dante, Virgil and Milton: if not all, at least the biggest of the lot. Kindly let us know the truth. Among your other and non-poetic incarnations, some surmise Alexander and Julius Caesar).

"Good Heavens, all that! You have forgotten that Mrs. Besant claims Julius Caesar. I don't want to be prosecuted by her for misappropriation of personality. Alexander was too much of a torrent for me; I disclaim Milton and Virgil, am unconscious of Dante and Valmiki, diffident like Nolini about the Bard (and money-lender?) of Avon. If, however, you can bring sufficiently cogent evidence, I am ready to take upon my back the offences of all the famous people in the world or any of them; but you must prove your case.

"Seriously, these historical identifications are a perilous game and open a hundred doors to the play of imagination. Some may, in the nature of things must, be true; but once people begin, they don't know where to stop. What is important is the lines, rather than the lives, the incarnation of Forces that explain what one now is—and, as for the particular lives or rather personalities, those alone matter which are very definite in one and have powerfully contributed to what one is developing now. But it is not always possible to put a name upon these; for not one hundred-thousandth part of what has been has still a name preserved by human Time."

(1-4-1932)

(Certain poets very strongly appeal to me and their minds and characters seem to have strong affinities with mine in different ways. Have you any intuition in the matter of my past lives? Mother once saw Horace (as well as Hector) behind Dilip; but she has told me nothing about myself except that she is positive I was an Athenian).

"A strong influence from one or more poets or all of them together is not sufficient to warrant a conclusion that one has been those poets or any of them in former lives. I have myself no intuition on the subject of your past lives, though from general impressions I would be inclined to wager that you were not only in Athens (that is evident) but in England during

the Restoration time or thereabouts, in Renaissance Italy etc: these, however, are only impressions." (12-5-37)

(Can one be born a man in one life and a woman in another? A French friend of mine once told me she was an Indian guru in a past life. Nishikanto related to me an old dream of his in which he saw himself as a famous English poetess!)

"The deuce! An Indian guru? Well! As for Nishikanto's dream, it does not show that he was that poetess, he may only have been identified with her in the dream. In any case, as far as I know, the births follow usually one line or the other and do not alternate—that, I think, is the Indian tradition also, though there are purposeful exceptions like Shikhandi's. If there is a change of sex, it is only part of the being that associates itself with the change, not the central being." (15-7-1937)

(There is an idea that X is a reincarnation of Shelley. It is supposed to be based on your own intuition or at least a practical certainty on your part. The character of X's poetry seems to add colour to the idea).

"I have never had any practical certainty or any certainty that X was Shelley. The question was often raised—I remember to have replied in the negative. No doubt there was a strong Shelleyan vein in X's poetry, but if everybody who has that is to be accounted a reincarnation of Shelley, we get into chaotic waters. In that case, Tagore must be a reincarnation of Shelley, and X, logically, must be a reincarnation of Tagore—who couldn't wait till Tagore walked off to Paradise or Shelley must have divided himself between the couple. It may be that afterwards I leaned at a time towards a hesitating acceptance, but I am certain that I was never certain about it.

"Besides, I imagine Shelley was not an evolutionary being but a being of a higher plane assisting in the evolution." (19-7-1937)

(Is it true that the same consciousness that took the form of Leonardo da Vinci had previously manifested as Augustus Caesar, the first Emperor of Rome? If so, will you please tell me what exactly Augustus Caesar stood for in the history of Europe and how Leonardo's work was connected with his?)

"Augustus Caesar organised the life of the Roman Empire and it was this that made the framework of the first transmission of the Graeco-Roman civilization to Europe—he came for that work and the writings of Virgil and Horace and others helped greatly towards the success of his mission. After the interlude of the Middle Ages, this civilisation was reborn in a new mould in what is called the Renaissance, not in its life-aspects but in

its intellectual aspects. It was therefore a supreme intellectual, Leonardo da Vinci, who took up again the work and summarised in himself the seeds of modern Europe." (29-7-1937)

(What determines the character and conditions of one's next life?)

"The psychic being at the time of death chooses what it will work out in the next birth and determines the character and conditions of the new personality. Life is for the evolutionary growth by experience in the conditions of the Ignorance till one is ready for the higher Light."

(28-7-37)

(Is the psychic being's choice coloured completely by the dying wish of the man, as the Gita seems to imply?)

"The dying wish of the man is only something on the surface—it may be determined by the psychic and so help to shape the future but it does not determine the psychic's choice. That is something behind the veil. It is not the outer consciousness's action that determines the inner process, but the other way round. Sometimes, however, there are signs or fragments of the inner action that come up on the surface, *e.g.* some people have a vision or remembrance of the circumstances of their past in a panoramic flash at the time of death, that is the psychic's review of the life before departing." (28-7-1937)

(It appears that the psychic being's choice at the time of death automatically works out the next formation of personality. But what decides the span of time between one birth and another? Is it the new formation getting prepared during the psyche's rest? And how does the psyche come to know when that formation is ready? Also, is the latter just what the former has willed or are there other elements and forces which come in and interfere so that the work becomes imperfect? Again, there is the question whether the so-called law of Karma has any validity at all. A man, for instance, who lives criminally and in sordid circumstances in this life may be born a beautiful character in a fine environment just because the psyche has worked out the criminal and the sordid experiences. So what exactly would be meant by the injunction to create good karma in order to better one's condition in the next birth?)

"The psychic being's choice at the time of death does not work out the next formation of personality, it fixes it. When it enters the psychic world, it begins to assimilate the essence of its experience and by that assimilation is formed the future psychic personality in accordance with the fixation already made. When this assimilation is over, it is ready for a new birth; but the less developed beings do not work out the whole thing for themselves, there are beings and forces of the higher world who have that work.

Also, when it comes to birth, it is not sure that the forces of the physical world will not come across the working out of what it wanted—its own new instrumentation may not be strong enough for that purpose; for, there is the interaction of its own energies and the cosmic forces here. There may be frustration, diversion, a partial working out—many things may happen. All that is not a rigid machinery, it is a working out of complex forces. It may be added, however, that a developed psychic being is much more conscious in this transition and works out much of it itself. The time depends also on the development and on a certain rhythm of the being—for some there is practically immediate rebirth, for others it takes longer, for some it may take centuries; but here, again, once the psychic being is sufficiently developed, it is free to choose its own rhythm and its own intervals. The ordinary theories are too mechanical—and that is the case also with the idea of *punya* and *papa* and their results in the next life. There are certainly results of the energies put forth in a past life, but not on that rather infantile principle. A good man's suffering in this life would be a proof according to the orthodox theory that he had been a very great villain in his past life, a bad man's prospering would be a proof that he had been quite angelic in his last visit to earth and sown a large crop of virtues and meritorious actions to reap this bumper crop of good fortune. Too symmetrical to be true. The object of birth being growth by experience, whatever reactions come to past deeds must be for the being to learn and grow, not as lollipops for the good boys of the class (in the past) and canings for the bad ones. The real sanction for good and ill is not good fortune for the one and bad fortune for the other, but this that good leads us towards a higher nature which is eventually lifted above suffering, and ill pulls us towards the lower nature which remains always in the circle of suffering and evil."*

(30-7-1937)

(It is written in some Tibetan book that when a person is dead he does not immediately realise the fact but tries to talk and touch just as usual and discovers the fact of his death only because he fails to touch and gets no response from the living people he has left behind. Is all this true? Does the disembodied being carry on his earth-habits for a time or is there a sudden gap in the consciousness? The Parsi scriptures say that for three or four days the being lingers by its corpse and the powerful mantric sounds made by the Avesta prayers during the death-ceremony serve to break the connection—but I wonder if the breaking is supposed to sever the being permanently from the world of the living. The spiritualists say that as long as we keep on mourning the spirit is kept tied and its progress is impeded.)

"It may happen to some not to realise for a little time that they are dead, especially if the death has been unforeseen and sudden, but it cannot

* This letter has already appeared in "Letters of Sri Aurobindo—Second Series"

be said that it happens to all or to most. Some may enter into a state of semi-unconsciousness or obsession by a dark inner condition created by their state of mind at death, in which they realise nothing of where they are, etc., others are quite conscious of the passage. It is true that the departing being in the vital body lingers for some time near the body or the scene of life, very often for as many as eight days and, in the ancient religions, mantras and other means were used for the severance. Even after the severance from the body a very earthbound nature or one full of strong physical desires may linger long in the earth-atmosphere up to a maximum period extended to three years. Afterwards, it passes to the vital worlds, proceeding on its journey which must sooner or later bring it to the psychic rest till the next life. It is true also that sorrow and mourning for the dead impede their progress by keeping them tied to the earth-atmosphere and pulling them back from their passage." (31-7-1937)

THE MOTHER

The Mother's Presence

(You have told us that the Mother is aware of everything. Does she know all our insignificant thoughts always or only when she concentrates?)

"I have said: 'Always behave as if the Mother was looking at you, because she is, indeed, always present.' This does not mean that in her physical mind she is thinking of you always and seeing your thoughts. There is no need of that, since she is everywhere and acts everywhere out of her universal knowledge.' (12-8-33)

(In what sense is Mother everywhere? Does Mother know all happenings in the physical plane?)

"Including what Lloyd George had for breakfast today or what Roosevelt said to his wife about the servants? Why should the Mother 'know' in the human way all happenings in the physical plane? Her business in her embodiment is to know the workings of the universal forces and use them for her works; for the rest she knows what she needs to know, sometimes with her inner self, sometimes with her physical mind. All knowledge is available in her universal self, but she brings forward only what is needed to be brought forward so that the working is done." (13-8-33)

The Mother's Grace

(What would you say about the utility of the physical approach to the Mother?)

"There is the utility of the physical approach to the Mother—the approach of the embodied mind and vital to her embodied Power. In her universal action the Mother acts according to the law of things—in her embodied physical action is the opportunity of a constant Grace—it is for that that the embodiment takes place." (12-8-33)

(Why does Mother in her universal action act according to the law of things, but in her embodied physical by constant Grace?)

"It is the work of the Cosmic power to maintain the cosmos and the law of the cosmos. The greater transformation comes from the Transcendent above the universal and it is that transcendent Grace which the embodiment of the Mother is there to bring into action." (13-8-33)

(What is the law of the working of the Mother's Grace?)

"The more one develops the psychic, the more is it possible for the Grace to act." (13-8-33)

(Can it be believed that the Mother's Grace is acting even when the difficulties do not disappear?)

"In that case everybody might say: 'All my difficulties must disappear at once, I must attain to perfection immediately and without difficulties, otherwise it proves that the Mother's Grace is not with me'." (20-7-33)

(Is it not that the more we individually open to the Mother's Light and Force, the more her power is established in the universal?)

"It is the transforming power that is established—the universal power is always there." (13-8-33)

(Is not Grace a miracle also?)

"No. There is really no such thing as miracle". (13-8-33)

The Mother's True Being

(Do you not refer to the Mother—our Mother—in your book *The Mother*?)

"Yes."

(Is she not the "Individual" Divine Mother who has embodied "the power of these two vaster ways of existence"—Transcendent and Universal?)

"Yes."

(Has she not descended here amongst us into Darkness and Falsehood and Error and Death in her deep and great love for us?)

"Yes". (17-8-33)

(There are many who hold the view that she was human but now embodies the Divine Mother. Her *Prayers and Meditations,* they hold, explain this view. But, to my mental conception, to my psychic feeling, she is the Divine Mother who has consented to put on her the cloak of obscurity and suffering and ignorance so that she can effectively lead us—human beings—to Knowledge and Bliss and the supreme Lord. I also conceive that her Prayers are meant to show us—the aspiring psychic—how to pray to the Divine. Am I right?)

"Yes. The Divine puts on an appearance of humanity, assumes the outward human nature in order to tread the path and show it to human beings, but does not cease to be the Divine. It is a manifestation that takes

place, a manifestation of a growing Divine consciousness, not human turning into divine. The Mother was inwardly above the human even in childhood. So the view held by 'many' is erroneous." (17-8-33)

(Am I right in thinking that she as an Individual embodies all the Divine Powers and brings down the Grace more and more to the physical plane and that her embodiment is a chance for the entire physical to change and be transformed?)

"Yes. Her embodiment is a chance for the earth-consciousness to receive the Supramental into it and to undergo first the transformation necessary for that to be possible. Afterwards there will be a further transformation by the Supramental, but the whole earth-consciousness will not be supramentalised—there will be first a new race representing the Supermind, as man represents the mind." (13-8-33)

The Mother's Action

(Sometimes the Mother does not smile at us. Does this mean displeasure on her part?)

"It is a mistake to think that the Mother's not smiling means either displeasure or disapproval of something wrong in the sadhak. It is very often merely a sign of absorption or of inner concentration. On this occasion the Mother was putting a question to your soul." (31-7-33)

(Can Mother see to the details of organisation?)

"It is quite impossible for the Mother to see to every detail of the organisation of the Ashram in person, even as it is she has no time free at all. It is understood that you can have things done, but it is with those who have charge that you must insist on the execution of any arrangement." (20-7-33)

(On what basis did Mother's action proceed in the case recently submitted to her?)

"Mother acted on her inner perception about the whole affair; she does not act only on the outer facts but on what she feels or sees lying behind them." (29-8-35)

(X's letter to me about her hip-joint pain was sent to Mother by me not on the same day but on the next. Yet it seems from X's latest that her pain disappeared soon after that letter had reached me. Was there an automatic effect of the letter, even before Mother was told of the letter's contents?)

"Y spoke to the Mother about X's pain on the same day—so it is not

necessary to suppose an automatic effect of the letter itself. But such an automatic effect does often take place either immediately after writing or when the letter enters the Mother's atmosphere."

(How does Mother's protection of the sadhaks from certain forces of death, disease, etc., work?)

"The Mother has made an arrangement with a view to all the occult forces and the best possible conditions for the protection of the sadhaks from certain forces of death, disease etc. It cannot work perfectly because the sadhaks themselves have not the right attitude towards food and kindred vital physical things. But still there is a protection. If, however, the sadhaks go outside her formation, it must be on their own responsibility. But this arrangement is for the Ashram and not for those who are outside."

(Is Mother testing us always?)

"The idea of tests is not a healthy one and ought not to be pushed too far. Tests are applied not by the Divine but by the forces of the lower planes—mental, vital and physical—and allowed by the Divine because that is a part of the soul's training and helps it to know itself, its power and the limitations it has to outgrow. The Mother is not testing you at every moment but rather helping you at every moment to rise beyond the necessity of tests and difficulties which belong to the inferior consciousness. To be always conscious of that help will be your best safeguard against all attacks whether of adverse powers or of your own lower nature". (23-2-31)

The Mother and Sri Aurobindo

(Is it possible that the Mother cannot help me but you can?)

"You consider that the Mother can be of no help to you......If you cannot profit by her help, you would find still less profit in mine. But in any case I have no intention of altering the arrangement I have made for all the disciples without exception that they should receive the light and force from her and not directly from me and be guided by her in their spiritual progress. I have made the arrangement not for any temporary purpose but because it is the one way—provided always the disciple is open and receives—that is true and effective (considering what she is and her power)."

(What is meant by the light of the Mother's consciousness and is it the same as that of yours? Does she lead us to the same goal as you?)

"The Mother's consciousness is the Divine Consciousness and the Light that comes from it is the Light of the Divine Truth.

One who receives and accepts and lives in the Mother's Light will

begin to see the truth on all the planes, the mental, the vital, the physical. He will reject all that is undivine—the undivine is the falsehood, the ignorance, the error of the dark forces; the undivine is all that is obscure and unwilling to accept the divine Truth and its Light and Force of the Mother.

That is why I am always telling you to keep yourself in contact with the Mother and Her Light and Force, because it is only so that you can come out of the confusion and obscurity and receive the Truth that comes from above.

When we speak of the Mother's Light or my Light in a special sense, we are speaking of a special occult action—we are speaking of certain Lights which come from the Supermind. In this action, the Mother's is the White Light that purifies, illumines, brings down the whole essence and power of the Truth and makes the transformation possible. But in fact all Light that comes from above, from the highest divine Truth is the Mother's.

There is no difference between the Mother's path and mine, we have and always had the same path, the path that leads to the Supramental change and the Divine realisation; not only at the end, but from the beginning they have been the same.

The attempt to set up a division and opposition putting the Mother on one side and myself on another and opposite or quite different side, has always been a trick of the forces of Falsehood when they want to prevent a sadhaka from reaching the Truth.

Know that the Mother's Light and Force are the Light and Force of the Truth; remain always in contact with the Mother's Light and Force, then only can you grow into the divine Truth." (10-9-1931)

YOGA AND LIFE

(Won't you tell me something to which I can always turn for help and contact during my stay in Bombay?)

"Remember the Mother and, though physically far from her, try to feel her with you and act according to what your inner being tells you would be her Will. Then you will be best able to feel her presence and mine and carry our atmosphere around you as a protection and a zone of quietude and light accompanying you everywhere." (12-12-36)

(It happens sometimes that when something in me seems to go out towards people to whom I was attached in the past I make a violent inner rejection of their influence but then I feel bad about the violence and let a movement of pity or softness or warmth go out towards them so as to undo whatever inner harm I might have done by that violence. I wonder if this movement has anything psychic in it and is permissible).

"The movement of which you speak is not psychic but emotive. It is a vital emotive force that you put out and waste. It is also harmful because, while on the one side you try to reject a past vital relation or tie with these people, you by this movement re-establish in another way a vital relation with them. If there was anything wrong in your first movement, this is quite a false way of remedying the defect.

"Certainly, it would be better to reject without any violent feeling against any person, because the violence is a sign of a certain weakness in the vital which must be corrected—not for any other reason. The rejection should be quiet, firm, self-assured, decisive; it will then become radical and effective." (3-5-30)

(How is it that one keeps shifting one's quality of self-feeling and self-being? And what is it in one that does so? It cannot be the outer "I", the ego-sense, the *Ahankara;* for you have written of the necessity of getting away from the *Ahankara* into a truer self. Something else then is there which is capable of getting away from the one to the other.)

"It all depends upon where the consciousness places itself and concentrates itself. If the consciousness places or concentrates itself within the ego, your are identified with the ego—if in the mind, it is identified with the mind and its activites and so on. If the consciousness puts its stress outside, it is said to live in the external being and becomes oblivious of its inner mind and vital and inmost psychic; if it goes inside, puts its centralising stress there, then it knows itself as the inner being or, still deeper, as the psychic being; if it ascends out of the body to the planes where self

is naturally conscious of its wideness and freedom it knows itself as the Self and not the mind, life or body. It is this stress of consciousness that makes all the difference. That is why one has to concentrate the consciousness in heart or mind in order to go within or go above. It is the disposition of the consciousness that determines everything, makes one predominantly mental, vital, physical or psychic, bound or free, separate in the Purusha or involved in the Prakriti." (16-7-37)

(If the inner or overhead planes get realised by me, isn't the realiser my outer waking personal consciousness? If it is not this consciousness—that is to say, the being of thought, feeling and sensation which I know normally as myself—than can I be said to have realised anything?)

"You take the outer waking consciousness as if it were the real person or being and conclude that if it is not this but something else that has the realisation or abides in the realisation, then no one has it—for there is no one here except the waking consciousness. That is the very error by which the ignorance lasts and cannot be got rid of. The very first step in getting out of the ignorance is to accept the fact that this outer consciousness is not one's soul, not oneself, not the real person, but only a temporary formation on the surface for the purposes of the surface play. The soul, the person is within, not on the surface—the outer personality is the person only in the first sense of the Latin word *persona* which meant originally a mask."

(26-7-37)

(What is the European notion of the true soul, the real person?)

"The non-materialistic European idea makes a distinction between soul and body—the body is perishable, the mental-vital consciousness is the immortal soul and remains always the same (horrible idea!) in heaven as on earth or if there is rebirth it is also the same damned personality that comes back and makes a similar fool of itself." (21-7-37)

(Why is X acting so strangely and what could be his grievance against us?)

"His main grievance with respect to the intellectuals is that he is cut off from all discussion of mental things and mental stimuli and so his mental energies are becoming atrophied. But a man who has a mental life ought surely not to be dependent on others for it, since that life is found within—there ought to be springs within, that flow of their own force."

(12-7-37)

(A friend of mine feels disposed towards the spiritual life. May I get his photograph for you to judge him? Do you think I should bring some persuasion to bear on him?)

"You may get his photograph—it may help to see what kind of nature he has. But there is no need to go out of the way to *persuade* him; from his letter he does not seem altogether ready for the spiritual life. His idea of life seems to be rather moral and philanthropic than spiritual at present, and behind it is the attachment to the family life. If the impulse to seek the Divine of which he speaks is more than a mental turn suggested by a vague emotion, if it has really anything psychic in it, it will come out at its own time; there is no need to stimulate, and a premature stimulation may push him towards something for which he is not yet fit." (12-1-31)

(I feel divided and disturbed. Above me is the ecstatic light; below me is a voluptuous darkness: I strain my arms towards the high splendour but my feet carry me into the frenzied deeps. The Mother is very dear to my soul, but that does not help me to make the obscure impulses turn and follow her. You will tell me that I must do this or do that; but what's the use of "must's" to one who feels too exhausted to move an inch in the right direction. I cannot conceive how possibly I can live without the Mother and yourself, but neither can I imagine how the mass of human folly in me is to be controlled and illumined.)

"The moral of the condition you describe is not that Yoga should not be done but that you have to go steadily healing the rift between the two parts of the being. The division is very usual, almost universal in human nature, and the following of the lower impulse in spite of the contrary will in the higher parts happens to almost everybody. It is the phenomenon noted by Arjuna in his question to Krishna, 'Why does one do evil though one wishes not to do it, as if compelled to it by force?', and expressed sententiously by Horace: *'video meliora proboque, Deteriora sequor'*.* By constant effort and aspiration one can arrive at a turning point when the psychic asserts itself and what seems a very slight psychological change or reversal alters the whole balance of the nature." **(2-3-37)**

(What would you say of an experience, during sleep, in which a seminal emission is prevented by a powerful pulling back of the fluid so that it flows inward again and one can feel and even hear it boiling and swirling at the root of the sex organ. Also, may I have a few words from you on whether constant sex control could induce impotence?)

"If it is like that, then it is the power of self-control, automatic and therefore belonging to the inner being, that is coming—the genuine thing. Of course to be complete the sexual passion and the thoughts that encourage it should disappear also. The idea about impotence is rather irrational —impotence comes from over-indulgence or wrong indulgence (certain perverse habits); it does not come from self-control. Self-control means

* "I see the better and approve of it, I follow the worse."

only a diversion to other powers, because the controlled sex-power becomes a force for the life-energies, the powers of the mind and the more and more potent workings of the spiritual consciousness." (9-12-32)

(This afternoon I dozed off. Presently I found myself trying to read a manuscript—especially where a part of it was somehow in a shadow. As this was difficult I thought of deciphering the brighter part, and concentrated there. Then I began to see designs and I don't recollect what else, until I felt my eyes getting drawn towards the centre between the brows. There was a strong pull towards it, resulting in my seeing a widening white circle, an aperture which grew about as big as perhaps an eight-anna piece. It struck me then that this was the famous "third eye" opening. May I know what you think?)

"It is very evidently the opening of the *Ajnachakra* or centre of inner thought and will and occult vision—there can be no doubt about it, from your description."

(I had an attack of cold in the nose this morning, which grew worse in the evening. I was wondering what to do to check it—when I just happened to look out of my window and saw on a cloud above the sunset a patch of mellow gold verging on light orange. I immediately felt that this glow was going to soothe my cold. So I sat quiet and kept staring at it—dipping imaginatively my nose into it. The effect was almost instant, and within a short time the cold was as good as gone. How would you explain this phenomenon? Did I become well because certain tones of light affect the nerves in a soothing way? The eyes and the nose have a close connection: irritation of the former by glare often produces a fit of sneezing; so perhaps what specially comforts the eyes acts as a "soother" for the nose?)

"It is quite possible. The connection between the eye and the nose is undeniable and that light has healing (also disturbing) powers is an established fact. So your theory is perfectly possible. It is also possible that your mind or something behind your mind (the inner will, say, in the third eye) acted on your nose (or the cold) with the imaginative nose-bath in orange light as a medium of realisation. You can take the thing by either end. Orange or red gold is supposed, by the way, to be the light of the supramental in the physical." (21-12-33)

(For Y's trouble, the advice of the doctors is a series of injections. I suppose he has to follow it?)

"Injections are all the fashion; for everything it is 'inject, inject and again inject'. Medicine has gone through three stages in modern times—first (at the beginning in Moliere's days) it was 'bleed and douche'—then 'drug and diet'—now it is 'serum and injection'. Praise the Lord! not for

the illnesses, but for the doctors. However, each of these formulas has a part truth behind it—with its advantages and disadvantages. As all religions and philosophies point to the Supreme but each in a different direction, so all medical fashions are ways to health—though they don't always reach it." (10-4-35)

(If, after the Mother or you start working spiritually on some relative or friend of ours who is reported to be ill, some wrong information happens to be given about his or her identity, does the help sent miss its mark?)

"Wrong information coming across the working creates a confusion so that it is no longer possible to say what is the result. Of course if the wrong information comes at the beginning, it would be still worse. It is very necessary that the information given should be correct." (10-6-35)

(When a man has much to say, even a slight occasional impediment in speech has a somewhat depressing effect. But what is stammering due to? How is it to be cured?)

"I don't think stammering has anything to do with insufficient lung-power nor is it caused by malformation of the vocal organs—it is commonly a nervous (physico-nervous) impediment and is perfectly curable. I can't say that I know of any especial device for it—people have used various kinds of devices to get over it, but behind them all will-power and a patient discipline of the utterance are indispensable." (13-5-32)

(I have several times dreamt of some of my teeth falling. They come off in my mouth and I spit them out. The sensation is horrible. Is there any significance in such dreams?)

"Not if you were thinking about your teeth. Symbolically, if the dream is symbolic, the falling of teeth means the disappearance of old or fixed mental habits belonging to the physical mind." (13-4-35)

(Last night—or rather early this morning—I had a dream in which I was vividly aware of being near you and touching your body. But I doubt very much my feeling, because in the dream you had an acute stomach-ache and were rather upset by it! Nirod, too, was near and I asked him to give you some peppermint and then I was helping you to go upstairs somewhere. At the close of the dream I found myself reading a poem, but I forget now what exactly it was. I am inclined to think that some disorder in my own stomach must have got transferred to my dream-figure of you. But please tell me if my "experience" of being in almost physical touch with you was as mythical as your gripe.)

"Well, it is difficult to say. The vivid awareness seems to indicate an actual contact—but the stomach-ache etc. seem to be a foreign intrusion.

What happens often in these dreams of the vital plane is that the subconscient (which is mainly responsible for ordinary dreams) throws its figures across the transcription of the experience and one gets a very mixed record. As I have no stomach-ache and, if I had, would not be in the least upset by it (for I have reached the stage when even the aches come only as a form of Ananda and, besides, if any non-delightful ache came in the stomach I could at once dismiss it, for that much at least of the semi-supramental force I have developed in me), this item must be put down to a subconscient dream-maker—whether transferring the pain from your stomach to mine or creating it *in vacuo* is open to debate." (15-12-35)

(It's come to be a habit now to get out of my body, time and again. Occasionally I just see with my closed eyes. At other times I actually leave the body—and the coming back to it is often due to some disturbing thrust of impulse from it into the new condition. I am fully conscious when I leave the body and soon start testing the concreteness and reality of the things I am amidst by touching them. Usually I move about in my own room but now and then I go outside too. The room I move in is not quite the same as the physical: the furniture is arranged somewhat differently. My conclusion is that I move in a subtle body in a subtle plane; but is that always unavoidable? Does one's subtle body never move in the very physical plane? In my latest experience I went to the pier, but the street through which I ran to reach the pier was of a strange kind because I moved, shortly after, from room to room, as through some deserted building. At last I glimpsed the sea; many boats were standing in dirty green water close to the shore. The word "lagoon" came to my mind. But further on I found myself in full sight of the sea. And it was an extremely beautiful spectacle. The water had a violet colour mixed with indigo and there was an atmosphere of magic as the large waves heaved and broke with spray and sparkle.

Two remarks I may make about the world I explore. While running I noticed or rather felt that the defect in my left leg was present there also. I wonder up to what plane my physical disability continues. Secondly, it is not always necessary to move step by step: one has just to wish to touch or reach an object and one is simply there without much sense of passing through the intervening space

I have asked whether one is forced to explore only some subtle world. But take the following experience. I was meditating in my easy-chair. A book was lying on my left side where I had put it before closing my eyes: there was a book-marker inserted at the page where I had stopped reading. Now, I went all numb, as I always do when these phenomena take place—but the eyes are exempted from the general paralysis, so to speak. I keep on opening them and thus swing from the consciousness of one plane to that of the other. This time, however, I opened my eyes and saw not only

my own body lying inert, with my both arms dropped paralysed, but also a third arm free at the right shoulder. It was, of course, a subtle arm and could move. Immediately my experimentalist mind thought of a test. So I strained the third arm towards the book by my side, caught hold of the book-marker and tried to pull it out. I actually did pull it out, but imagine my surprise when I saw that though I was holding a book-marker in my subtle hand the original was still in the book!)

"It is evidently in a subtle world, not the physical that you move; that is evident from the different arrangement of things, but such details as the third arm and the book-marker removed yet there show that it is a subtle world very near to the physical; it is either a subtle-physical world or a very material vital domain. In all the subtle domains the physical is reproduced with a change, the change growing freer and more elastic as one gets farther away. Such details as the lameness show the same thing,—the hold of the physical is still there. It is possible to move about in the physical world, but usually that can only be done by drawing on the atmosphere of other physical beings for a stronger materialisation of the form—when that happens one moves among them and sees them and all the surroundings exactly as they are at that time in the physical world and one can verify the accuracy of the details if immediately after returning to the body (which is usually done with a clear consciousness of the whole process of getting into it) one can traverse the same scene in the physical body. But this is rare; the subtle wandering is on the contrary a frequent phenomenon, only when it is near to the physical world all seems very material and concrete and the association of physical habits and physical mental movements with the subtle events is closer." (23-8-37)

(I am feeling uneasy and unsettled. Aspiration seems almost extinguished. To put it more precisely, although I want to aspire I don't have the necessary impetus to satisfy that wish. *Tamas* weighs my consciousness down—so that I don't have the inward energy left even to try writing poetry with sufficient effort. Please send me inspiration—and tell me if all this recurring cloud of incapacity comes as a sign that after all I am doomed to taste nothing more than a mere drop of the yogic life. I find yoga ever so difficult—but I am appalled by a prospect of labyrinthine uselessness when I think of the ordinary life.

I have fallen between two stools—the old joy is gone and there is nothing else to replace it. I remember myself as I was before this desire for the Infinite and the Eternal invaded my consciousness. Morning after morning I used to get up full of a laughing energy—confident and impregnable, eager to taste everything and happy with a sense of power to do so, aware of a certain harmony between myself and the universe and of a poised mental capacity to mould experience to the purposes of literature. No difficulty, no disaster could daunt me: the star of accident

was there to cast its malign influence, but through the worst vicissitudes I passed with unabated vigour and courage and optimism and grip of the intellect on life. I had evolved a half-Shavian half-Goethean outlook —fearlessness, force, gusto, wideness, idealism, all these mixed together and made me feel complete in general, looking forward only to fill in detail after enrichening detail as the years would unroll their various surprises. There were also crudenesses in my composition just as there were disasters in my experience, but everything was held together, every strain assimilated by a dominating tune of mentalised vitality...Then, all of a sudden, came the devastating glory of the Divine: an earthquake, as it were, and almost in the moment when I felt most masterful and triumphant on my peak of intellect and life-force, the foundations of the world shook and I was broken utterly by the sense that a whole infinitude was wanting to my experience, by an immeasurable hunger that found all I had valued and acquired a mere morsel of miserable pleasure. The old poise and power were lost, common passions grew stale and I was just a poor mortal struggling helplessly and understanding that only the Divine could save me and that nothing had any worth without the Divine. But where have I come through all this? I have achieved so little, though I have seen and known and felt the greatest that life can offer—the truth that is you and the Mother. Yes, this is great, yet in myself I seem to be a failure. To replace what has been destroyed, something more is required, a deeper and more permanent experience. You have made me write poetry that you have considered fine and I am extremely thankful, but I am also extremely dissatisfied with my incapacity to move forward in even the poetic field. What a limited instrument I am after all! Others with a much smaller natural endowment are proving far more receptive and fluent mediums. Of course all artistic creation is a glory and a rapture and it would show a most mean mind to encourage envy and a most pitiable temperament to be unable to enjoy intensely the beauty of other people's work. What I am realising is my own limitation in the sphere of art just as in the sphere of yoga. I have not won the same degree of confident power here as I had in the pre-yogic days. I can never return to that, because that kind of intellectual and vital vigour is now inaccessible—and not even attractive, since I have known greater splendours, but all the same I am acutely conscious of being incomplete, a quivering fragment, an interplay of chords not yet resolved into a harmony. And, what is worst, I am obsessed at present by a sense of "thus far and no further." Could you give me any hope? Why is my mind so wretchedly limited, my soul such a feeble flame?)

"It is not the question, for this is not a question of personal capacity but of the development of the receptivity and for that the sole thing necessary is an entire or at least a dominant will to receive. What you call your mind and your soul are only a small surface part of you, not your whole being. Personal capacity belongs to the temporary surface

personality which you have put forward in this life and which is mutable, is already changing and can change much farther—e.g. the poems you are writing are certainly beyond what was your original capacity—they belong to a range of experience to the Word of which you have opened by a development beyond your old mental self—a farther development beyond not only your old mental self but also your old vital self is needed to get the concrete realisation of that range of experience.

"What is standing in the way is something that is still attached to the limitations of the old personality and hesitates to take the plunge because by doing so it may lose these cherished limitations. It stands back in apprehension from the plunge because it is afraid of being taken out of its depth—but unless one is taken out of the very shallow depth of this small part of the self, how can one get into the Infinite at all? Furthermore, there is no real danger in finding oneself in the Infinite, it is a place of greater safety and greater riches, not less; but this something in you does not like the prospect because it has to merge itself into a larger self-existence. You asked the Mother to press on you the lighting of the fire within, and she has been doing so, but this is standing back with the feeling, 'Oh Lord! what will become of me if this flame gets lit.' You must get rid of this clinging to the past self and life; then you can have a fire which will not be feeble. You have not fallen between two stools—you are hesitating between two consciousnesses, the old and the new, the small and the great; that is all.

"As for the poetry, well—you have developed up to a point at which your work is of a very rare and unique quality in no way inferior to that of the others of whom you speak,—the difficulty of controlling production is nothing, for all feel that except Nishikanto and Dilip who have no misgivings about their creative power. Yours rises probably from the fact that in order to have free command of the highest planes of poetry, you have to rise into them and not only open to the Word from them—it is therefore the same difficulty in another form. Otherwise if you had the old self-satisfaction of which you draw so glowing a picture, you would have found your present poetry marvellous and gone on writing it—only oscillating between the different planes achieved and content to do so. This is not a proof of incapacity but of the will to greater things. Only that will must not be in the mind only but take full hold of the vital also and must be a will that what you write of should be a part not only of thought but of life. Which comes back to what I have written above—get free from the obscure hesitation to open and let the fire do its work.

"One must either do that if one wants a rapid change or go quietly and wait for the slower working from behind the veil to reduce and break the obstacle." **(10-8-37)**

(Will the Supermind, when it makes its descent, have the power to transform us in spite of ourselves?)

"I suppose the (vital's) will to resist will disappear."

(I am all agog to know whether I should pack up for Pondicherry. Should I come away with my heart still far below normal by medical standards? I surely can't expect it to catch up with normalcy so soon after that mistake of mine with the tonic stimulant powder given me by a friend. You know that owing to an error in instructions, instead of taking the normal dose, I swallowed more than 4 grains, which—if I may believe the doctors—means about 50 times the normal dose, over 4 times the dose a horse might be given and nearly 25 times the dose at which the drug begins to be sheer poison for human beings! I also remained without real medical aid for 45 minutes! In my awful condition I only kept calling to Mother and you. Of course I am again up and doing, and I can't take this set-back very seriously, though I have semi-collapses now and then and the medicos say I need regular attention and should not exert myself. Mother and you get me out of all scrapes; the sweet grace of you both has been unfailing. And I don't think I am much frightened by theoretical possibilities of death. Will my undertaking to come away do me any harm? This is a year in which, I believe, the Truth-Consciousness may make up its mind, or rather its Supermind, to descend. I was expecting a wire from Mother in May; it's almost the end of July now—but the year is not out yet, and August 15 is pretty close. Won't I be losing something great if I don't throw all caution to the winds?)

"You must on no account return here before your heart has recovered. No doubt, death must not be feared, but neither should death or permanent ill-health be invited. Here, especially now when all the competent doctors have gone away or been sent to a distance from Pondicherry, there would be no proper facilities for the treatment you still need, while you have them all there. You should remember the Mother's warning to you when she said that you would have your realisation in this life provided you did not do something silly so as to shorten your life. That 'something silly' you tried your best to do when you swallowed with a cheerful liberality a poison-medicine without taking the least care to ascertain what was the maximum dose. You have escaped by a sort of miracle, but with a shaken heart. To risk making that shaky condition of the heart a permanent disability of the body rendering it incapable of resisting any severe physical attack or shock in the future, would be another 'something silly' of the same quality. So it's on no account to be done.

"You need not be afraid of losing anything great by postponing your return to Pondicherry. A general descent of the kind you speak of is not in view at the moment and, even if it comes, it can very easily catch you up into itself whenever you come if you are in the right openness; and if

you are not, then even its descending would not be of so urgent an importance, since it would take you time to become aware of it or receive it. So there is no reason why you should not in this matter cleave to common sense and the sage advice of the doctors." (1-8-38)

(It is well-known and pretty evident that you realised the Supermind years ago. But is the impression right that you stand on that high level and act directly from there and the sole thing left is to bring the Supermind down completely into the embodied consciousness here? Or is it that even the outer consciousness of you is acting straight from a supramental realisation? Or would it be correct to say that at present this consciousness is functioning from only the top of the Overmind established in it?)

"If I had been standing on the Supermind level and acting on the world by the instrumentation of Supermind, the world would have changed or would be changing much more rapidly and in a different fashion from what is happening now. My present effort is not to stand up on a high and distant Supermind level and change the world from there , but to bring something of it down here and to stand on that and act by that, but at the present stage the progressive supramentalisation of the Overmind is the first immediate preoccupation and a second is the lightening of the heavy resistance of the Inconscient and the support it gives to human ignorance which is always the main obstacle in any attempt to change the world or even to change oneself. I have always said that the spiritual force I have been putting on human affairs such as the War is not the supramental but the Overmind force, and that when it acts in the material world it is so inextricably mixed up in the tangle of the lower world forces that its results, however strong or however adequate to the immediate object, must necessarily be partial. That is why I am getting a birthday present of a free India on August 15, but complicated by its being presented in two packets as two free Indias: this is a generosity I could have done without, one free India would have been enough for me if offered as an unbroken whole."

(7-8-47)

(What has happened to my letter of request for a Message to grace the Special Number of *Mother India* of August 15? I have heard nothing from you.)

"I have been trying to get you informed without success about the impossibility of your getting your expected Message from me for the 15th August. I had and have no intention of writing a Message for my birthday this year. It is psychologically impossible for me to manufacture one to command; an inspiration would have to come and it is highly improbable that any will come in this short space of time; I myself have no impulse towards it. But how is it that you have clean forgotten my rule of not writing any article for an outside paper, magazine or journal—I mean other

than those conducted from the Ashram by the Ashram—and even for these I write nothing new except for the *Bulletin* at the Mother's request, —also my reasons for this fixed rule? If I started doing that kind of thing, my freedom would be gone; I would have to write at everybody's command, not only articles but blessings, replies on public questions and all the rest of that kind of conventional rubbish. I would be like any ordinary politician publishing my views on all and sundry matters, discoursing on all sorts of subjects, a public man at the disposal of the public. That would make myself, my blessings, my views and my Messages exceedingly cheap; in fact, I would no longer be Sri Aurobindo. Already the *Hindusthan Standard*, the *Madras Mail* and I know not what other journal and societies are demanding at the pistol's point special messages for themselves and I am supposed to stand and deliver. I won't. I regret that I must disappoint you, but self-preservation is a first law of nature." (3-8-49)

(I am sending you a statement by a friend about certain experiences of his. Will you please comment on it? Another friend wishes to collect money for Mother. He says he will be very much helped if Mother writes for him a statement about approaching people for monetary help.)

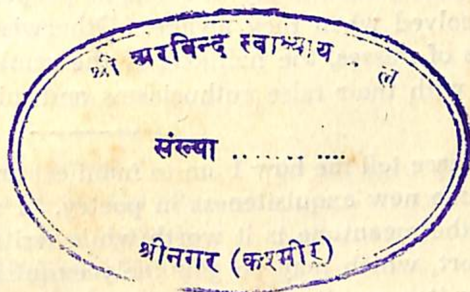
"I am not very sure of the significance of your friend's statement about experiences. The 'double' voice is a frequent phenomenon; it happens very often when one has been long repeating a mantra that a voice or consciousness within begins to repeat it automatically—also prayer can be taken up in the same way from within. It is usually by an awakening of the inner consciousness or by the going in of the consciousness more deeply within from its outward poise that this happens. This is supported in his case by the fact that he feels himself half way to trance, his body seems to melt away, he does not feel the weight of the book etc.; all these are well-known signs of the inner consciousness getting awake and largely replacing the outer. The moral effects of his new condition would also indicate an awakening of the inner consciousness, the psychic or psychic-mental perhaps. But on the other hand he seems to feel this other voice as if outside him and to have the sense of another being than himself, an invisible presence in the room. The inner being is often felt as someone separate from or other than the ordinary self, but it is not usually felt outside. So it may be that in this state of withdrawal he comes into contact with another plane or world and attracts to himself one of its beings who wants to share in his sadhana and govern it. The last is not a very safe phenomenon, for it is difficult to say from the data what kind of being it is and the handing over of the government of one's inner development to any other than the Divine, the Guru or one's own psychic being may bring with it serious peril. That is all I can say at present.

"You will find with this a letter from the Mother giving you her point of view with regard to the request for a written statement from herself

about approaching people for money. You must make your friend understand that this is not done and cannot be done. If he feels moved to do this as work for the Mother, the knowledge that it is needed should be enough. It is not a question of a public appeal for funds, but of getting friends and sympathisers to help. You will see from the Mother's letter the spirit in which it should be done."

THE MOTHER'S LETTER

"I am not in the habit of writing for money to anybody. If people do not feel that it is for them a great opportunity and Grace to be able to give their money for the Divine cause, *tant pis pour eux!** Money is needed for the work—money is bound to come; as for *who* will have the privilege of giving it, that remains to be seen." (29-4-38)



*"So much the worse for them!"

YOGA AND POETIC DEVELOPMENT

(The least fault in my poetic expression of spiritual realities puts me in a hurry to set things right. I have found some alternatives to replace the lines which did not come up to the mark in a recent poem. Is any of them good?)

"Merciful heavens, what a splashing and floundering! When you miss a verse or a poem, it is better to wait in an entire quietude about it (with only a silent expectation) until the true inspiration comes, and not to thrash the inner air vainly for possible variants—like that the true form is much more likely to come, as people go to sleep on a problem and find it solved when they awake. Otherwise, you are likely to have only a series of misses, the halfgods of the semi-poetic mind continually intervening with their false enthusiasms and misleading voices." (11-7-31)

(Please tell me how I am to manifest an absolutely genuine and at the same time new exquisiteness in poetry. I suppose I must myself change; but in the meantime is it worth while writing poems, I mean even of the good sort, which may be genuinely exquisite but the like of which have been written so often in the past?)

"Certainly if you want to achieve a greater poetry, more unique, you will yourself have to change, to alter the poise of your consciousness. At present you write, as you do other things, too much with the brain, the mere human intelligence. To get back from the surface vital into the psychic and psychic vital, to raise the level of your mental from the intellect to the Illumined Mind is your need both in poetry and in Yoga. I have told you already that your best poetry comes from the Illumined Mind, but as a rule it either comes from there with too much of the transcription diminished in its passage through the intellect or else is generated only in the creative poetic intelligence. But so many poets have written from that intelligence. If you could always write direct from the Illumined Mind—finding there not only the substance, as you often do, but the rhythm and language, that indeed would be a poetry exquisite, original and unique. The intellect produces the idea, even the poetic idea, too much for the sake of the idea alone; coming from the Illumined Mind the idea in a form of light and music is itself but the shining body of the Light Divine.

"On the other hand to cease writing altogether might be a doubtful remedy. By your writing here you have at least got rid of most of your

former defects, and reached a stage of preparation in which you may reasonably hope for a greater development hereafter. I myself have more than once abstained for some time from writing because I did not wish to produce anything except as an expression from a higher plane of consciousness, but to do that you must be sure of your poetic gift, that it will not rust by too long a disuse!" (4-9-31)

(What distinguishes in manner and quality a pure inspiration of the Illumined Mind from that which has the psychic for its origin?)

"Your question reads like a poser in an examination paper. And suppose I could give a satisfactory definition Euclidianly rigid, I don't know that it would be of much use or would really help you to distinguish between the two kinds; these things have to be felt and perceived by experience. I would prefer to give examples. I suppose it would be impossible to find a more perfect example of psychic inspiration in English literature than Shelley's lines,

I can give not what men call love:
But wilt thou accept not
The worship the heart lifts above,
And the Heavens reject not:
The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow?

—you will find there the true rhythm, expression and substance of poetry full of the psychic influence. I have not any books of poetry with me except my own and Shakespeare's; so I will give you examples first of the Illumined Mind and then of the combination of the psychic and the Illumined Mind powers from a poet whom you will perhaps easily recognise.* For the first the lines—

The longing of ecstatic tears
From infinite to infinite—

will do very well. For the combination, here is an example that could not be bettered:

If Thou desirest my weak self to outgrow
Its mortal longings, lean down from above,
Temper the unborn light no thought can trace,
Suffuse my mood with a familiar glow.
For 'tis with mouth of clay I supplicate:
Speak to me heart to heart words intimate,
And all Thy formless glory turn to love
And mould Thy love into a human face. (1931)

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* The correspondent himself.

(My poetic stock so far—almost the end of 1931—is rather scanty: only a dozen poems that have been *completely* approved by you. Two of them you have liked immensely and some of the others you have pronounced "very fine" or "very good". Do you think I could have your assurance that in spite of this small stock I need not feel inferior to the other Indian poets who have written in English—Manmohan Ghose and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Sarojini Naidu?)

"What have you to do with what others have achieved? If you write poetry, it should be from the standpoint that you have something of your own which has not yet found full expression, a power within which you can place at the service of the Divine and which can help you to grow—you have to get rid of all in it that is merely mental or merely vital, to develop what is true and fine in it and leave the rest until you can write from a higher level of consciousness things that come from the deepest self and the highest spiritual levels. Your question is that of a littérateur and not in the right spirit. Besides, even from a mental point of view, such comparisons are quite idle. Sarojini Naidu has at best a strange power of brilliant colour and exquisite melody which you are not likely ever to have; on the other hand she is narrowly limited by her gift. Harindranath has an unfailing sense of beauty and rhythm (or had it before he became a Bolshevik and Gandhist)—while your writing is very unequal; but I do not suppose he will ever do much better than he has done or produce anything that will put him in the first rank of poets, unless he changes greatly in the future.* As for my brother, I do not know enough of his poetry to judge; I know he had a better knowledge of technique than any of these poets, but my impression was that life and enduring quality were not there. How am I to compare you in these things with them? You have another turn and gift and you have in the resources of Yoga a chance of constant progression and growth and of throwing all imperfections behind you. Measure what you do by the standard of your own possible perfection; what is the use of measuring it by the achievement of others?" **(1931)**

(My inspiration has come to a dead stop. What the devil is the matter with me? The power of poetry seems to have completely forsaken me.)

"I do not think you need be anxious about the poetry; the power is sure to re-express itself as soon as you are ready for a progress. It has probably stopped working temporarily because the pressure is now for the inner self-creation more than for the outer expression—I am speaking, of course, of your case in particular. The expression in poetry and other

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* This remark was made before the work done during the two years spent by Chattopadhyaya in the Ashram. The criticism in it may not apply to that work, part of which differed from anything done by him previously or subsequently.

forms must be, for the yogi, a flowing out from a growing self within and not merely a mental creation or an aesthetic pleasure. Like that the inner self grows and the poetic power will grow with it." (9-12-31)

(I don't know what to do with this mind of mine. As a poetic instrument it is extremely variable. Why can't it always get successfully inspired?)

"Perhaps one reason why your mind is so variable is because it has learned too much and has too many influences stamped upon it; it does not allow the real poet in you who is a little at the back to be himself—it wants to supply him with a form instead of allowing him to breathe into the instrument his own notes. It is, besides, too ingenious. What you have to learn is the art of allowing things to come through and recognising among them the one right thing—which is very much what you have to do in Yoga also. It is really this recognition that is the one important need—once you have that, things become much easier." (3-2-32)

(Is there something definitely in the rhythm or language of a line of poetry which would prove it to be from a certain plane? Take the lines I am sending you. From what you once wrote to me I gather that my first quotation has an Overmind movement as well as substance coming strongly coloured by the vital. But where and in what lies the vital colour which makes it the highest Shakespearian and not, say, the highest Wordsworthian? How does one catch here and elsewhere the essential *differentiae*?)

"It is a question of feeling, not of intellectual understanding. The second quotation from Shakespeare—

Eternity was in our lips and eyes,
Bliss in our brows' bent; none our parts so poor
But was a race of heaven—

is plainly vital in its excited thrill. I have given the instance (in *The Future Poetry)* of Shakespeare's

(Life) is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

That is a 'thought', a judgment on life, so would naturally be assigned to the intellect, but as a matter of fact it is a throw-up from Macbeth's vital, an emotional or sensational, not an intellectual judgment and its whole turn and rhythm are vital.

"About the first quotation, Shakespeare's

The prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come,

there might be some doubt, but still it is quite different in tone from Wordsworth's line on Newton—

Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone—

which is an above-head vision—and the difference comes because the vision of the 'dreaming soul' is felt through the vital mind and heart before it finds expression. It is this constant vitality, vital surge in Shakespeare's language, which makes it a sovereign expression not of mind or knowledge but of life."

(1934)

(In a poem recently submitted to you, you marked certain lines as coming from the Illumined Mind and some others as from the Intuition. Could you just hint the characteristics of the two sources?)

"The poetry of the Illumined Mind is usually full of a play of lights and colours, brilliant and striking in phrase, for illumination makes the Truth vivid—it acts usually by a luminous rush. The poetry of the Intution may have play of colour and bright lights, but it does not depend on them—it may be quite bare, it tells by a sort of close intimacy with the Truth, an inward expression of it. The Illumined Mind sometimes gets rid of its trappings, but even then it always keeps a sort of lustrousness of robe which is its characteristic."

(1934)

(Here are some passages from the Mundaka Upanishad and from the Gita's Vision of the Cosmic Spirit. Have they the accent of what you have described in *The Future Poetry* as the *mantra?* The target of all mystic and spiritual poetry should be, in my opinion, the mantric utterance. At least the target of my own poetry certainly is. Will you shed some light on the *mantra's* peculiar quality? And tell me, please, whether we can expect a poetry from even beyond the *mantra*—poetry of the as yet unmanifest Supermind?)

"The *mantra* (not necessarily in the Upanishads alone) as I have tried to describe it in *The Future Poetry* is what comes from the Overmind inspiration. Its characteristics are a language that says infinitely more than the mere sense of the words seems to indicate, a rhythm that means even more than the language and is born out of the Infinite and disappears into the Infinite and the power to convey not merely some mental, vital or physical contents or indications or values of the thing it speaks of, but its value and figure in some fundamental and original consciousness which is behind them all. The passages you mention have certainly the Overmind accent. But ordinarily, as I have said, the Overmind inspiration does not come out pure in human poetry. It has to lift it by a seizure and surprise from above into the Overmind largeness; but in doing so there is usually a mixture of the two elements, the uplifting influence and the lower stuff of mind. You must remember that the Overmind is a superhuman consciousness and to

be able to write always or purely from an Overmind inspiration would mean the elevation of at least a part of the nature beyond the human level. But to write of these things would need a greater length of exposition than I can give you at present.

"But how do you expect a Supramental inspiration to come down here when the Overmind itself is so rarely within human reach? That is always the error of the impatient aspirant, to think he can get the Supermind without going through the intervening stages or to imagine that he has got it when in fact he has only got something from the illumined or intuitive or at the highest some kind of mixed Overmind consciousness." (1934)

(To help me distinguish the planes of inspiration, could you just indicate where the following lines have their sources?

(1) *What visionary urge*
Has stolen from horizons watched alone
Into thy being with ethereal guile?

(2) *A huge sky-passion sprouting from the earth*
In branchèd vastnesses of leafy rapture.

(3) *The mute unshadowed spaces of her mind.*

(4) *A sea unheard where spume nor spray is blown.*

(5) *Irradiant wing-waft through eternal space,*
Pride of lone rapture and invincible sun-gaze.

(6) *Born nomad of the infinite heart!*
Time-tamer! star-struck debauchee of light!
Warrior who hurls his spirit like a dart
Across the terrible night
Of death to conquer immortality!

(7) *....And to the earth-self suddenly*
Came, through remote entrancèd marvelling
Of adoration ever-widening,
A spacious sense of immortality.

(8) *Here life's lost heart of splendour beats immense.*

(9) *The haunting rapture of the vast dream-wind*
That blows, star-fragrant, from eternity.

(10) *An ocean-hearted ecstasy am I*
Where time flows inward to eternal shores.)

"(1) Second line Intuitive with Overmind touch. Third line imaginative Poetic Intelligence.
(2) Imaginative Poetic Intelligence with something of the Higher Mind.
(3) Intuitive with Overmind touch.
(4) Intuitive.
(5) Higher Mind with mental Overmind touch.
(6) Illumined Mind with mental Overmind touch.

(7) Mixture of Higher and Illumined Mind—in the last line the mental Overmind touch.
(8) Illumined Mind with mental Overmind touch.
(9) Ditto.
(10) Intuitive, Illumined, Overmind touch all mixed together.

"I have analysed but very imperfectly—because these influences are so mixed together that the descriptions are not exhaustive.

"Also remember that I speak of a *touch*, of the *mental* Overmind touch and that when there is the touch it is not always complete—it may be more apparent from something either in the language or substance or rhythm than in all three together.

"Even so, perhaps some of my descriptions are overhasty and denote the impression of the moment. Also the poetical value of the poetry exists independent of its source." (13-2-34)

(It was extremely kind of you to analyse a few weeks back the influences of different planes in my poetry. I seem to have some feeling now of the qualities proper to them. I should like to know, however, whether you intend any important distinction when you speak of "Overmind touch" and "mental Overmind touch".)

"Yes—the Overmind proper has some gnostic light in it which is absent in the mental Overmind." (2-3-34)

(Once the consciousness is aware of a certain vibration and poetic quality, it is possible to reach out towards its source of inspiration. As poetry for us here must be a way of Yoga, I suppose this reaching out is a helpful attempt; but it would become easier if there were some constant vibration present in the consciousness, which we know to have descended from the higher ranges. Very often the creative spark comes to me from the poems I read. I shall be obliged if you will indicate the origin of the few examples below—only the first of which is from my own work.

(1) *Plumbless inaudible waves of shining sleep.*
(2) *The diamond dimness of the domèd air.*
(3) *Withdrawn in a lost attitude of prayer.*
(4) *This patter of Time's marring steps across the solitude*
Of Truth's abidingness, Self-blissful and alone.
(5) *Million d'oiseaux d'or, O future vigueur!*
(6) *Rapt above earth by power of one fair face.*
(7) *I saw them walking in an air of glory.*
(8) *Solitary thinkings such as dodge*
Conception to the very bourne of heaven,
Then leave the naked brain.

(9) But felt through all this fleshly dress
Bright shoots of everlastingness.
(10) I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,
All calm as it was bright.)

"(1) Illumined Mind.
(2) Illumined Mind.
(3) Intuition.
(4) Illumined Mind with an intuitive element and a strong Overmind touch.
(5) Illumined Mind.
(6) Difficult to say. More of Higher Mind perhaps than anything else—but something of illumination and intuition also.
(7) It is a mixture. Something of the Illumined Mind, something of the Poetic Intelligence diluting the full sovereignty of the higher expression.
(8) Higher Mind combined with Illumined.
(9) Illumined Mind with something from Intuition.
(10) Illumined Mind with something from Overmind."

(7-3-34)

("Beyond—beyond!" seems always the cry of the poet in me—not only the highest mysticism and spiritual truth but also the expression of them from the highest plane. I am haunted by a miraculous poetic creation existing on a plane far away, of which I cannot yet be master. This breeds disgust with even things I might be proud of at present. What would you advise as a remedy for my strange condition?)

"It is no use being disgusted because there is a best you have not reached yet; every poet should have that feeling of 'a miraculous poetic creation existing on a plane' he has not reached, but he should not despair of reaching it; but rather he has to regard present achievement not as something final but as steps towards what he hopes some day to write. That is the true artistic temper." (1-5-34)

(I have given a copy of yesterday's poem to the library, but I am visited by a doubt. Was it a perfect success? If not, I should like to withdraw it. I have no ambition to swell the number of my poems if I can't maintain a high level of quality. So please let me know where it stands.

P.S.—By the way, will you tell me if the following two ideas of mine are correct? (1) Your comments on the compositions sent you by anybody here are based on a fundamental aesthetic standard, whatever the consideration you may include from the spiritual standpoint: that is to say, you would not give praise unless the spiritual substance has been finely expressed,

nor, to take an extreme case, would you withhold praise if even a non-spiritual substance came to be finely expressed, though you might add that such poetry was not our aim here. Of course you would commend more highly something which is not only perfect in expression but very deep also in spiritual substance, than what is equally perfect but not so deep; still, you would not say "very good" unless the form was flawless, nor pronounce a composition "successful" just to encourage something that might help one's sadhana, no matter if the form was hopeless.

(2) Your judgment is according to a fixed qualitative criterion where the form is concerned: it does not differ with different writers, provided you do not add any qualifying phrase. Thus, a poem, say, by Shailen would be aesthetically on a par with one of Harin's or Arjava's if simply the remark "very good" was won by them all. It is possible that sometimes you would give a restrained comment, but privately you judge by an unvarying aesthetic standard—don't you? By "unvarying" I don't mean a partiality for a particular kind of style: I am referring to level of excellence.)

"You seem to demand a very rigid and academic fixity of meaning from my hastily penned comments on the poetry sent to me. I have no unvarying aesthetic standard or fixed qualitative criterion,—not only so, but I hold any such thing to be impossible with regard to so subtle and unintellectual an essence as poetry. It is only physical things that can be subjected to fixed measures and unvarying criteria. Appreciation of poetry is a question of feeling, of intuitive perception, of a certain aesthetic sense, it is not the result of an intellectual judgment.

"My judgment does differ with different writers and also with different kinds of writings. If I put 'very good' on a poem of Shailen's, it does *not* mean that it is on a par with Harin's or Arjava's or yours. It means that it is very good Shailen, but not that it is very good Harin or very good Arjava. 'If very good were *won* by them all,' you write! But, good heavens, you write that as if I were a master giving marks in a class. I may write 'good' or 'very good' on the work of a novice if I see that it has succeeded in being poetry and not mere verse however correct or well rhymed—but if Harin or Arjava or you were to produce work like that, I would not say 'very good' at all. There are poems of yours which I have slashed and pronounced unsatisfactory, but if certain others were to send me that, I would say, 'Well, you have been remarkably successful this time.' I am not giving comparative marks according to a fixed rule. I am using words flexibly according to the occasion and the individual. It would be the same with different kinds of writings. If I write 'very good' or 'excellent' on some verses of Dara about his chair, I am not giving it a certificate of equality with some poems of yours similarly appreciated—I am only saying that as humorous easy verse in the lightest vein it is very successful, an outstanding piece of work. Applied to your poem it would

mean something different altogether.

"Coming from your huge P.S. to the tiny body of your letter, what do you mean by 'a perfect success?' I meant that pitched in a certain key and style your poem had worked itself out very well in that key and style in a very satisfying way from the point of view of thought, expression and rhythm. From that standpoint it is a perfect success. If you ask whether it is at your highest possible pitch of inspiration, I would say no, but it is nowhere weak or inadequate and it says something poetically well worth saying and says it well. One cannot always be writing at the highest pitch of one's possibility, but that is no reason why work of very good quality in itself should be rejected." (14-11-34)

(The Muse is again away and I am feeling impatient. Can't you give me some clue about the direction of consciousness by which I may draw her back to me or reach out to her? But, of course, I want the highest and I want a thorough perfection. Perhaps I am too careful and self-critical. But that is my nature as an artist. Has it got something to do with the Muse's flight? In any case, the experience of uncreativeness, the loss of the freedom of flying on the wings of inspiration, the sense of the poetic part of me caught in the mere mind and rendered vague and ineffective—all this is most unpleasant. Sometimes I fear the present lack of fluency may become a permanent defect. What method would you advise to counteract it. Quieting the mind? What do *you* do to get inspiration?)

"Poetry seems to have intervals in its visits to you very often. I rather think the malady is fairly common. Dilip and Nishikanta who can write whenever they feel inclined are rare birds. I don't know about 'the direction of consciousness'. My own method is not to quiet the mind, for it is eternally quiet, but to turn upward and inward. You, I suppose, would have to quiet it first, which is not always easy. Have you tried it?

"It is precisely the people who are careful, self-critical, anxious for perfection who have interrupted visits from the Muse. Those who don't mind what they write, trusting to their genius, vigour, fluency to carry it off are usually the abundant writers. There are exceptions, of course. 'The poetic part caught in the mere mind' is an admirable explanation of the phenomenon of interruption—it was the same with myself in the old days. Fluent poets are those who either do not mind if they do not always write their very best or whose minds are sufficiently poetic to make even their 'not best' verse pass muster well. Sometimes you write things that are good enough, but not your best—but both your insistence and mine—for I think it essential for you to write your best always, at least your 'level best'—may have curbed your fluency a good deal.

"The diminution of your prose was compensated by the much higher and maturer quality to which it attained afterwards. It would be so, I

suppose, with the poetry and a new level of consciousness once attained there might well be a new fluency. So there is not much justification for the fear." (1935)

(Would the emergence of the psychic being make the writing of "above-head" poetry possible?)

"To get the psychic being to emerge is not easy, though it is a very necessary thing for *sadhana* and when it does it is not certain that it will switch on to the above-head planes at once. But obviously anyone who could psychicise his poetry would get a unique place among the poets.

"The direct psychic touch is not frequent in poetry. It breaks in sometimes—more often there is only a tinge here and there." (19-10-36)

(Would the emergence of the psychic being cut across any above-head inspiration?)

"I don't suppose the emergence of the psychic would interfere at all with the inspiration from above. It would be more likely to help it by making the connection with these planes more direct and conscious." (20-10-36)

(Why aren't you satisfied with my line: "An ultimate crown of inexhaustible joy"? Is it bad poetry or not "overhead" enough and therefore not in tune with its context?)

"The line is strong and dignified, but it impresses me as too mental and Miltonic. Milton has very usually (in *Paradise Lost*) some of the largeness and rhythm of the Higher Mind, but his substance is—except at certain heights—mental, mentally grand and noble. The interference of the mental Miltonic is one of the great stumbling blocks when one tries to write from 'above'."* (17-11-36)

(How is it that after all this training under you and getting inspiration from certain of the planes towards which I kept straining my consciousness I relapsed into inferior poetry? Either a relapse or else I grow dumb—and even otherwise it is no easy job to receive the kind of inspiration I want. There are fine flowings at times, but often there are blockings in places and I have to wait and wait for their removal. I feel dejected and wonder when the intense joy that poetry brings me will be free from these most discouraging impediments. My relapse at the moment, as regards those lines, fills me with shame.)

"It is not a relapse, but an oscillation which one finds in almost every

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* When the line was changed to "An ultimate crown of joy's infinity", Sri Aurobindo found it more acceptable as part of the poem concerned.

poet. Each has a general level, a highest level and a lower range in which some defects of his poetical faculty come out. You have three manners: (1) a sort of decorative romantic manner that survives from your early days —this at a lower pitch turns to too much dressiness of an ornamental kind, at a higher to post-Victorian, Edwardian or Georgian rhetoric with a frequent saving touch of Yeats; (2) a level at which all is fused into a fine intuitive authenticity and beauty, there is seldom anything to change; (3) a higher level of grander movement and language in which you pull down or reach the influences of the Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Overmind Intuition. The last you have not yet fully mastered so as to write with an absolute certainty and faultlessness except by lines and stanzas or else as a whole in rare moments of total inspiration, but you are moving towards mastery in it. Sometimes these inspirations get mixed up together. It is this straining towards greater height that creates the difficulty, yet it is indispensable for the evolution of your genius. It is not surprising, therefore, that inspiration comes with difficulty often, or that there are dormant periods or returns of the decorative inspiration. All that is part of the day's work and dejection is quite out of place." (20-4-37)

(In a recent letter you wrote: "What you are writing now is 'overhead' poetry—I mean poetry inspired from those planes—before you used to write poems very often from the intuitive mind—these had a beauty and perfection of their own." These words of yours set me asking: Isn't the intuitive mind itself an overhead power?)

"The intuitive mind, strictly speaking, stretches from the Intuition proper down to the intuitivised inner mind—it is therefore at once an overhead power and a mental intelligence power. All depends on the amount, intensity, quality of the intuition and how far it is mixed with mind or pure. The inner mind is not necessarily intuitive, though it can easily become so. The mystic mind is turned towards the occult and spiritual, but the inner mind can act without direct reference to the occult and spiritual, it can act in the same field and in the same material as the ordinary mind, only with a larger and deeper power, range and light and in greater unison with the Universal Mind; it can open also more easily to what is within and what is above. Intuitive intelligence, mystic mind, inner mind intelligence are all part of the inner mind operation. In today's poem, for instance—*A Poet's Stammer*—

My dream is spoken
As if by sound
Were tremulously broken
Some vow profound.
A timeless hush
Draws ever back

The winging music-rush
Upon thought's track.
Though syllables sweep
Like golden birds,
Far lonelihoods of sleep
Dwindle my words.
Beyond life's clamour,
A mystery mars
Speech-light to a myriad stammer
Of flickering stars—

it is certainly the inner mind that has transformed the idea of stammering into a symbol of inner phenomena and into that operation a certain strain of mystic mind enters, but what is prominent is the intuitive inspiration throughout. It blends with the intuitive poetic intelligence in the first stanza, gets touched by the overhead intuition in the second, gets full of it in the third and again rises rapidly to that in the two last lines of the fourth stanza. This is what I call poetry of the intuitive mind." (13-5-1937)

(How is it that people find my poetry difficult? I almost suspect that only Nolini and Arjava get the whole hang of it properly. Of course many appreciate when I have explained it to them—but otherwise they admire the beauty of individual phrases without grasping the many-sided whole the phrases form. This morning Premanand, Vijayarai and Nirod read my *Agni*. None of them caught the precise relevances, the significant connections of the words and phrases of the opening lines:

Not from the day but from the night he's born,
Night with her pang of dream—star on pale star
Winging strange rumour through a secret dawn.
For all the black uncanopied spaces mirror
The brooding distance of our plumbless mind.

In the rest of the poem too they failed to get, now and again, the true point of felicity which constitutes poetic expression. My work is not surrealist: I put meaning into everything, not intellectualism but a coherent vision worked out suggestively in various detail. Why then the difficulty? Everybody feels at home in Harin's poetry, though I dare say that if I catechised them I might find the deepest felicities missed. All the same, there was something in his work which made his sense more accessible. Even Dilip says that my work passes a little over his head—Arjava's, of course, he finds still more difficult. Perhaps I tend to pack too much stuff into my words and to render my links a little less explicit than Harin did—or Dilip himself does in Bengali. But would people have the same trouble with vernacular poetry, however like my own it might be?)

"It is precisely because what you put in is not intellectualism or a

product of mental imagination that your poetry is difficult to those who are accustomed to a predominantly mental strain in poetry. One can grasp fully if one has some clue to what you put in, either the clue of personal experience or the clue of a sympathetic insight. One who has had the concrete experience of the consciousness as a night with the stars coming out and the sense of the secret dawn can at once feel the force of those two lines, as one who has had experience of the mind as a wide space or infinity or a thing of distances and expanses can fathom those that follow. Or even if he has had not these experiences but others of the same order, he can feel what you mean and enter into it by a kind of identification. Failing this experience, a sympathetic insight can bring the significance home; certainly, Nolini and Arjava who write poems of the inner vision and feeling must have that, moreover their minds are sufficiently subtle and plastic to enter into all kinds of poetic vision and expression. Premanand and Vijayrai have no such training; it is natural that they should find it difficult. Nirod ought to understand, but he would have to ponder and take some trouble before he got it; night with her labour of dream, the stars, the bird-winging, the bird-voices, the secret dawn are indeed familiar symbols in the poetry he is himself writing or with which he is familiar; but his mind seeks usually at first for precise allegories to fit the symbols and is less quick to see and feel by identification what is behind them—it is still intellectual and not concrete in its approach to these things, although his imagination has learned to make itself their transcribing medium. That is the difficulty, the crux of imaged spiritual poetry; it needs not only the fit writer but the fit audience—and that has yet to be made.

"Dilip wrote to me in recent times expressing great admiration for Arjava's poems and wanting to get something of the same quality into his own poetic style. But in any case Dilip has not the mystic mind and vision —Harin also. In quite different ways they receive and express their vision or experience through the poetic mind and imagination—even so, because it expressed something unusual, Dilip's poetry has had a difficulty in getting recognised except by people who were able to give the right response. Harin's poetry deals very skilfully with spiritual ideas or feelings through the language of the emotion and the poetic imagination and intelligence— no difficulty there. As regards your poetry, it is indeed more compressed and carefully packed with substance and that creates a difficulty except for those who are alive to the language or have become alive to subtle shades, implications, depths in the words. Even those who understand a foreign language well in the ordinary way find it sometimes difficult to catch these in its poetry. Indications and suggestions easy to catch in one's own tongue are often missed there. So probably your last remark is founded." (14-5-37)

(I hope people won't misunderstand what you have remarked about the mystic mind. One's not having the mystic mind and vision does not

reflect upon one's poetic excellence, even as a singer of the Spirit. As regards Harin, you had said long ago that he wrote from several planes. And surely his *Dark Well* poems come from a source beyond the poetic intelligence?)

"I used the word 'mystic' in the sense of a certain kind of inner seeing and feeling of things, a way which to the intellect would seem occult and visionary—for this is something different from imagination and its work with which the intellect is familiar. It was in this sense that I said Dilip had not the mystic mind and vision. One can go far in the spiritual way, have plenty of spiritual visions and dreams even without having this mystic mind and way of seeing things. So too one may write poetry from different planes or sources of inspiration and expressing spiritual feelings, knowledge, experience and yet use the poetic intelligence as the thought medium which gives them shape in speech; such poems are not of the mystic type. One may be mystic in this sense without being spiritual—one may also be spiritual without being mystic; or one may be both spiritual and mystic in one. Poems ditto.

"I had not in view the *Dark Well* poems when I wrote about Harin. I was thinking of his ordinary way of writing. If I remember right, the *Dark Well* poems came from the inner mind centre, some from the Higher Mind—other planes may have sent their message to his mind to put in poetic speech, but the main worker was the poetic intelligence which took what was given and turned it into something very vivid, coloured and beautiful,—but surely not mystic in the sense given above." (15-5-37)

(You have made me believe in my poetic destiny. But I want as soon as possible to outgrow the remnants of the decorative and rhetorical level and write more and more with an inspiration near to the Overmind if not actually from it. What should I do? It is difficult to keep the consciousness merely uplifted: I feel "high and dry." Can't you pour some cataract from above? Both in Yoga and in poetry I crave for the potent ease of the highest planes. I aspire to live, as well as to echo in quality of inspiration, those four lines of yours which I consider a plenary *mantra:*

Arms taking to a voiceless supreme delight,
Life that meets the Eternal with close breast,
An unwalled mind dissolved in the Infinite,
Force one with unimaginable rest.

Show me a way to realise my aspiration. I feel very impatient—though I must confess to my shame that the aspiration of the poet is more frequently in the forefront than that of the yogi.)

"Impatience does not help; intensity of aspiration does. The use of keeping the consciousness uplifted is that it then remains ready for the

flow from above when that comes. To get as early as possible to the highest range one must keep the consciousness steadily turned towards it and maintain the call. First one has to establish the permanent opening—or get it to establish itself, then the ascension and frequent, afterwards constant descent. It is only afterwards that one can have the ease."

(21-4-37)

(My lines—

Across the keen apocalypse of gold . . .

and

A white word breaks the eternal quietude . . .

—which you consider fine may be authentic poetry and true to spiritual reality but I find nothing strikingly new in them in their present context. Don't you believe that to repeat excellently is as much a fault in its own way as to do so half successfully? I may be in a peculiar mood, but I am sick of these shining monotonies. I think some of my poetic colleagues need as much as myself to get rid of them.)

"Obviously, it is desirable not to repeat oneself or, if one has to, it is desirable to repeat in another language and in a new light. Still, even that cannot be overdone. The difficulty about most writers of spiritual poetry is that they have a limited field of experience or art tacked on to a limited inspiration, though an intense one. How to get out of it? The only recipe I have is to widen oneself (or one's receptivity) always or else perhaps wait in the eternal quietude for a new white word to break it..."

(29-8-37)

SRI AUROBINDO'S OWN POETRY

EDITOR'S NOTE

The following letter of Sri Aurobindo's, except for a passage at the end, was never published during his life-time for certain reasons mentioned by him in another letter to me.. He wrote: "It was to be, as I suggested, between ourselves; there is too much that is private and personal in it for publicity. It is something that can be shown to those who can appreciate and understand, but to an ordinary reader I might seem to be standing on my defence rather than attacking and demolishing a criticism which might damage the appreciation of my poetry in readers who are not sure of their own critical standard and the reliability of their taste and so might be shaken by well-phrased and plausible reasonings such as your friend's: they might make the same confusion as he himself between an apology and an apologia. An idea might rise that I am not sure of the value of my own poetry especially the earlier poetry and accept his valuation of it. The 'humility' you speak of is very largely a Socratic humility, the element of irony in it is considerable; but readers not accustomed to fineness of shades might take it literally and conclude wrongly that I accepted the strictures passed by an unfavourable criticism. A poet who puts no value or a very low value on his own writing has no business to write poetry or to publish it or keep it in publication; if I allowed the publication of the 'Collected Poems' it is because I judged them worth publishing...On the other hand, in defending I may seem to be eulogising my own work, which is not a thing that can be done in public even if a poet's estimate of his achievement is as self-assured as that of Horace, 'Exegi monumentum aere perennius', or as magnificent as Victor Hugo's. Similarly, the reply was not meant for your friend himself and I do not think the whole can be shown to him without omissions or some editing, but if you wish and if you think that he will not resent any strictures I have made you can show him the passages relevant to his criticism."

Now that Sri Aurobindo has departed from his body, the "private" and "personal" appear in a different light and what could not be made public because the writer was in our midst loses much of its directly controversial aspect and acquires a new self-revealing value. Combined with the private and the personal, here there is also such an amount of illuminating comment of a highly literary nature that under the altered circumstances it would be a great pity to keep it any longer from the world's eyes.

You have asked me to comment on your friend's comments* on my poetry and especially on *Savitri*. But, first of all, it is not usual for a poet to criticise the criticisms of his critics though a few perhaps have done so; the poet writes for his own satisfaction, his own delight in poetical creation or to express himself and he leaves his work for the world, and rather for posterity than for the contemporary world, to recognise or to ignore, to judge and value according to its perception or its pleasure. As for the con-

* They were made apropos of the book, 'The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo' by K. D. Sethna.

temporary world he might be said rather to throw his poem in its face and leave it to resent this treatment as an unpleasant slap, as a contemporary world treated the early poems of Wordsworth and Keats, or to accept it as an abrupt but gratifying attention, which was ordinarily the good fortune of the great poets in ancient Athens and Rome and of poets like Shakespeare and Tennyson in modern times. Posterity does not always confirm the contemporary verdict, very often it reverses it, forgets or depreciates the writer enthroned by contemporary fame, or raises up to a great height work little appreciated or quite ignored in its own time. The only safety for the poet is to go his own way careless of the blows and caresses of the critics; it is not his business to answer them. Then you ask me to right the wrong turn your friend's critical mind has taken; but how is it to be determined what is the right and what is the wrong turn, since a critical judgment depends usually on a personal reaction determined by the critic's temperament or the aesthetic trend in him or by values, rules or canons which are settled for his intellect and agree with the viewpoint from which his mind receives whatever comes to him for judgment; it is that which is right for him though it may seem wrong to a different temperament, aesthetic intellectuality or mental viewpoint. Your friend's judgments, according to his own account of them, seem to be determined by a sensitive temperament finely balanced in its own poise but limited in its appreciations, clear and open to some kinds of poetic creation, reserved towards others, against yet others closed and cold or excessively depreciative. This sufficiently explains his very different reactions to the two poems, *Descent* and *Flame-Wind,* which he unreservedly admires and to *Savitri.* However, since you have asked me, I will answer, as between ourselves, in some detail and put forward my own comments on his comments and my own judgments on his judgments. It may be rather long; for if such things are done, they may as well be clearly and thoroughly done. I may also have something to say about the nature and intention of my poem and the technique necessitated by the novelty of the intention and nature.

Let me deal first with some of the details he stresses so as to get them out of the way. His detailed intellectual reasons for his judgments seem to me to be often arbitrary and fastidious, sometimes based on a misunderstanding and therefore invalid or else valid perhaps in other fields but here inapplicable. Take, for instance, his attack upon my use of the prepositional phrase. Here, it seems to me, he has fallen victim to a grammatical obsession and lumped together under the head of the prepositional twist a number of different turns some of which do not belong to that category at all. In the line,

Lone on my summits of calm I have brooded with voices around me,

there is no such twist; for I did not mean at all "on my calm summits", but intended straightforwardly to convey the natural, simple meaning of the word. If I write "the fields of beauty or "walking on the paths of truth"

I do not expect to be supposed to mean "in beautiful fields" or "in truthful paths"; it is the same with "summits of calm", I mean "summits of calm" and nothing else; it is a phrase like "He rose to high peaks of vision" or "He took his station on the highest summits of knowledge". The calm is the calm of the highest spiritual consciousness to which the soul has ascended, making those summits its own and looking down from their highest heights on all below: in spiritual experience, in the occult vision or feeling that accompanies it, this calm is not felt as an abstract quality or a mental condition but as something concrete and massive, a self-existent reality to which one reaches, so that the soul standing on its peak is rather a tangible fact of experience than a poetical image. Then there is the phrase "A face of rapturous calm" in the lines,

Infinity's centre, a face of rapturous calm
Parted the eternal lids that open heaven:

he seems to think it is a mere trick of language, a substitution of a prepositional phrase for an epithet, as if I had intended to say "a rapturously calm face" and I said instead "a face of rapturous calm" in order to get an illegitimate and meaningless rhetorical effect. I meant nothing of the kind, nothing so tame and poor and scanty in sense: I meant a face which was an expression or rather a living image of the rapturous calm of the supreme and infinite consciousness,—it is indeed so that it can well be "Infinity's centre". The face of the liberated Buddha as presented to us by Indian art is such an expression or image of the calm of Nirvana and could, I think, be quite legitimately described as a face of Nirvanic calm, and that would be an apt and live phrase and not an ugly artifice or twist of rhetoric. It should be remembered that the calm of Nirvana or the calm of the supreme Consciousness is to spiritual experience something self-existent, impersonal and eternal and not dependent on the person—or the face—which manifests it. In these two passages I take then the liberty to regard the criticism as erroneous at its base and therefore invalid and inadmissible.

Then there are the lines from the *Songs of the Sea:*

The rains of deluge flee, a storm-tossed shade,
Over thy breast of gloom....

"Thy breast of gloom" is not used here as a mere rhetorical and meaningless variation of "thy gloomy breast"; it might have been more easily taken as that if it had been a human breast, though even then, it could have been entirely defensible in a fitting context; but it is the breast of the sea, an image for a vast expanse supporting and reflecting or subject to the moods or movements of the air and the sky. It is intended, in describing the passage of the rains of deluge over the breast of the sea, to present a picture of a storm-tossed shade crossing a vast gloom: it is the gloom that has to be stressed and made the predominant idea and the breast or expanse is only its support and not the main thing: this could not have been suggested by merely writing "thy gloomy breast". A prepositional phrase need not be merely an artificial twist replacing an adjective; for instance, "a world of

gloom and terror" means something more than "a gloomy and terrible world", it brings forward the gloom and terror as the very nature and constitution, the whole content of the world and not merely an attribute. So also if one wrote "Him too wilt thou throw to thy sword of sharpness" or "cast into thy pits of horror", would it merely mean "thy sharp sword" and "thy horrible pits" and would not the sharpness and the horror rather indicate or represent formidable powers of which the sword is the instrument and the pits the habitation or lair? That would be rhetoric but it would be a rhetoric not meaningless but having in it meaning and power. Rhetoric is a word with which we can batter something we do not like; but rhetoric of one kind or another has been always a great part of the world's best literature; Demosthenes, Cicero, Bossuet and Burke are rhetoricians, but their work ranks with the greatest prose styles that have been left to us. In poetry the accusation of rhetoric might be brought against such lines as Keats'

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down . . .

To conclude, there is "the swords of sheen" in the translation of *Vande Mataram.* That might be more open to the critic's stricture, for the expression can be used and perhaps has been used in verse as merely equivalent to "shining swords"; but for any one with an alert imagination it can mean in certain contexts something more than that, swords that emit brilliance and seem to be made of light. Your friend says that to use this turn in any other than an adjectival sense is unidiomatic, but he admits that there need be no objection provided that it creates a sense of beauty, but he finds no beauty in any of these passages. But the beauty can be perceived only if the other sense is seen, and even then we come back to the question of personal reaction; you and other readers may feel beauty where he finds none. I do not myself share his sensitive abhorrence of this prepositional phrase; it may be of course because there are coarser rhetorical threads in my literary taste. I would not, for instance, shrink from a sentence like this in a sort of free verse, "Where is thy wall of safety? Where is thy arm of strength? Whither has fled thy vanished face of glory?" Rhetoric of course, but it has in it an element which can be attractive, and it seems to me to bring in a more vivid note and mean more than "thy strong arm" or "thy glorious face" or than "the strength of thy arm" and "the glory of thy face".

I come next to the critic's trenchant attack on that passage in my symbolic vision of Night and Dawn in *Savitri,* in which there is recorded the conscious adoration of Nature when it feels the passage of the omniscient Goddess of eternal Light. Trenchant, but with what seems to me a false edge; or else if it is a sword of Damascus that would cleave the strongest material mass of iron he is using it to cut through subtle air, the air closes behind his passage and remains unsevered. He finds here only poor and false poetry, unoriginal in imagery and void of true wording and true vision, but that is again a matter of personal reaction and everyone has a

right to his own, you to yours as he to his. I was not seeking for originality but for truth and the effective poetical expression of my vision. He finds no vision there, and that may be because I could not express myself with any power; but it may also be because of his temperamental failure to feel and see what I felt and saw. I can only answer to the intellectual reasonings and judgments which turned up in him when he tried to find the causes of his reaction. These seem to me to be either fastidious and unsound or founded on a mistake of comprehension and therefore invalid or else inapplicable to this kind of poetry. His main charge is that there is a violent and altogether illegitimate transference of epithet in the expression "the wide-winged hymn of a great priestly wind". A transference of epithet is not necessarily illegitimate, especially if it expresses something that is true or necessary to convey a sound feeling and vision of things: for instance, if one writes in an Ovidian account of the *dénouement* of a lover's quarrel,

In spite of a reluctant sullen heart
My willing feet were driven to thy door,

it might be said that it was something in the mind that was willing and the ascription of an emotion or state of mind to the feet is an illegitimate transfer of epithet; but the lines express a conflict of the members, the mind reluctant, the body obeying the force of the desire that moves it and the use of the epithet is therefore perfectly true and legitimate. But here no such defence is necessary becaue there is no transfer of epithets. The critic thinks that I imagined the wind as having a winged body and then took away the wings from its shoulders and clapped them on to its voice or hymn which could have no body. But I did nothing of the kind; I am not bound to give wings to the wind. In an occult vision the breath, sound, movement by which we physically know of a wind is not its real being but only the physical manifestation of the wind-god or the spirit of the air, as in the Veda the sacrificial fire is only a physical birth, temporary body or manifestation of the god of Fire, Agni. The gods of the Air and other godheads in the Indian tradition have no wings, the Maruts or storm-gods ride through the skies in their galloping chariots with their flashing golden lances, the beings of the middle world in the Ajanta frescoes are seen moving through the air not with wings but with a gliding natural motion proper to ethereal bodies. The epithet "wide-winged" then does not belong to the wind and is not transferred from it, but is proper to the voice of the wind which takes the form of a conscious hymn of aspiration and rises ascending from the bosom of the great priest, as might a great-winged bird released into the sky, and sinks and rises again, aspires and fails and aspires again on the "altar hills". One can surely speak of a voice or a chant of aspiration rising on wide wings and I do not see how this can be taxed as a false or unpoetic image. Then the critic objects to the expression "altar hills" on the ground that this is superfluous as the imagination of the reader can very well supply this detail for itself from what has already been said: I do not think this is correct, a very alert reader might do so but most would

not even think of it, and yet the detail is an essential and central feature of the thing seen and to omit it would be to leave a gap in the middle of the picture by dropping out something which is indispensable to its totality. Finally he finds that the line about the high boughs praying in the revealing sky does not help but attenuates, instead of more strongly etching the picture. I do not know why, unless he has failed to feel and to see. The picture is that of a conscious adoration offered by Nature and in that each element is conscious in its own way, the wind and its hymn, the hills, the trees. The wind is the great priest of this sacrifice of worship, his voice rises in a conscious hymn of aspiration, the hills offer themselves with the feeling of being an altar of the worship, the trees lift their high boughs towards heaven as the worshippers, silent figures of prayer, and the light of the sky into which their boughs rise reveals the Beyond towards which all aspires. At any rate this "picture" or rather this part of the vision is a complete rendering of what I saw in the light of the inspiration and the experience that came to me. I might indeed have elaborated more details, etched out at more length but that would have been superfluous and unnecsary; or I might have indulged in an ampler description but this would have been appropriate only if this part of the vision had been the whole. This last line—"The high boughs prayed in a revealing sky"—is an expression of an experience which I often had whether in the mountains or on the plains of Gujarat or looking from my window in Pondicherry not only in the dawn but at other times and I am unable to find any feebleness either in the experience or in the words that express it. If the critic or any reader does not feel or see what I so often felt and saw, that may be my fault, but that is not sure, for you and others have felt very differently about it; it may be a mental or a temperamental failure on their part and it will be then my or perhaps even the critic's or reader's misfortune.

I may refer here to your friend's disparaging characterisation of my epithets. He finds that their only merit is that they are good prose epithets, not otiose but right words in their right place and exactly descriptive but only descriptive without any suggestion of any poetic beauty or any kind of magic. Are there then prose epithets and poetic epithets and is the poet debarred from exact description using always the right word in the right place, the *mot juste?* I am under the impression that all poets, even the greatest, use as the bulk of their adjectives words that have that merit, and the difference from prose is that a certain turn in the use of them accompanied by the power of the rhythm in which they are carried lifts all to the poetic level. Take one of the passages from Milton:

On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues....
Blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides
And Tiresias and Phineus, prophets old.

Here the epithets are the same that would be used in prose, the right word in the right place, exact in statement, but all lies in the turn which makes them convey a powerful and moving emotion and the rhythm which gives

them an uplifting passion and penetrating insistence. In more ordinary passages such as the beginning of *Paradise Lost* the epithets "forbidden tree" and "mortal taste" are of the same kind, but can we say that they are merely prose epithets, good descriptive adjectives and have no other merit? If you take the lines about Nature's worship in *Savitri*, I do not see how they can be described as prose epithets; at any rate I would never have dreamt of using in prose unless I wanted to write poetic prose such expressions as "wide-winged hymn" or "a great priestly wind" or "altar hills" or "revealing sky"; these epithets belong in their very nature to poetry alone whatever may be their other value or want of value. He says they are obvious and could have been supplied by any imaginative reader; well, so are Milton's in the passages quoted and perhaps there too the very remarkable imaginative reader whom your friend repeatedly brings in might have supplied them by his own unfailing poetic verve. Whether they or any of them prick a hidden beauty out of the picture is for each reader to feel or judge for himself; but perhaps he is thinking of such things as Keats' "magic casements" and "foam of perilous seas" and "fairy lands forlorn", but I do not think even in Keats the bulk of the epithets are of that unusual character.

I have said that his objections are sometimes inapplicable. I mean by this that they might have some force with regard to another kind of poetry but not to a poem like *Savitri*. He says, to start with, that if I had had a stronger imagination, I would have written a very different poem and a much shorter one. Obviously, and to say it is a truism; if I had had a different kind of imagination, whether stronger or weaker, I would have written a different poem and perhaps one more to his taste; but it would not have been *Savitri*. It would not have fulfilled the intention or had anything of the character, meaning, world-vision, description and expression of spiritual experience which was my object in writing this poem. Its length is an indispensable condition for carrying out its purpose and everywhere there is this length, critics may say an "unconscionable length"—I am quoting the description of the *Times' Litarary Supplement's* reviewer in his otherwise eulogistic criticism of *The Life Divine*—in every part, in every passage, in almost every canto or section of a canto. It has been planned not on the scale of *Lycidas* or *Comus* or some brief narrative poem, but of the longer epical narrative, almost a minor, though a very minor *Ramayana;* it aims not at a minimum but at an exhaustive exposition of its world-vision or world-interpretation. One artistic method is to select a limited subject and even on that to say only what is indispensable, what is centrally suggestive and leave the rest to the imagination or understanding of the reader. Another method which I hold to be equally artistic or, if you like, architectural is to give a large and even a vast, a complete interpretation, omitting nothing that is necessary, fundamental to the completeness: that is the method I have chosen in *Savitri*. But your friend has understood nothing of the significance or intention of the passages he is

criticising, least of all, their inner sense—that is not his fault, but is partly due to the lack of the context and partly to his lack of equipment and you have there an unfair advantage over him which enables you to understand and see the poetic intention. He sees only an outward form of words and some kind of surface sense which is to him vacant and merely ornamental or rhetorical or something pretentious without any true meaning or true vision in it: inevitably he finds the whole thing false and empty, unjustifiably ambitious and pompous without deep meaning or, as he expresses it, pseudo and phoney.* His objection of *longueur* would be perfectly just if the description of the night and the dawn had been simply of physical night and physical dawn; but here the physical night and physical dawn are, as the title of the canto clearly suggests, a symbol, although what may be called a real symbol of an inner reality and the main purpose is to describe by suggestion the thing symbolised; here it is a relapse into Inconscience broken by a slow and difficult return of consciousness followed by a brief but splendid and prophetic outbreak of spiritual light leaving behind it the "day" of ordinary human consciousness in which the prophecy has to be worked out. The whole of *Savitri* is, according to the title of the poem, a legend that is a symbol and this opening canto is, it may be said, a key beginning and announcement. So understood there is nothing here otiose or unnessary; all is needed to bring out by suggestion some aspect of the thing symbolised and so start adequately the working out of the significance of the whole poem. It will of course seem much too long to a reader who does not understand what is written or, understanding, takes no interest in the subject; but that is unavoidable.

To illustrate the inapplicability of some of his judgments one might take his objection to repetition of the cognates "sombre vast", "unsounded void", "opaque Inane", "vacant vasts" and his clinching condemnation of the inartistic inelegance of their occurrence in the same place at the end of the line. I take leave to doubt his statement that in each place his alert imaginative reader, still less any reader without that equipment, could have supplied these descriptions and epithets from the context, but let that pass. What was important for me was to keep constantly before the view of the reader, not imaginative but attentive to seize the whole truth of the vision in its totality, the ever-present sense of the Inconscience in which everything is occurring. It is the frame as well as the background without which all the details would either fall apart or stand out only as separate incidents. That necessity lasts until there is the full outburst of the dawn and then it disappears; each phrase gives a feature of this Inconscience proper to its place and context. It is the entrance of the "lonely splendour" into an otherwise inconscient obstructing and unreceptive world that has to be

* The Critic's Note: "Could I have anticipated that my letter would meet his eyes, had I even intended the criticism for print, I would have written in the more becoming spirit of a student, in a strain free from the suspicion of levity, and I would have abstained from words like...... (well, I shrink from writing them now), using others untinged with offence, and perhaps more nearly expressive of my feeling."

brought out and that cannot be done without the image of the "opaque Inane" of the Inconscience which is the scene and cause of the resistance. There is the same necessity for reminding the reader that the "tread" of the Divine Mother was an intrusion on the vacancy of the Inconscience and the herald of deliverance from it. The same reasoning applies to the other passages. As for the occurrence of the phrases in the same place each in its line, that is a rhythmic turn helpful, one might say necessary to bring out the intended effect, to emphasise this reiteration and make it not only understood but felt. It is not the result of negligence or an awkward and inartistic clumsiness, it is intentional and part of the technique. The structure of the pentameter blank verse in *Savitri* is of its own kind and different in plan from the blank verse that has come to be ordinarily used in English poetry. It dispenses with enjambment or uses it very sparingly and only when a special effect is intended; each line must be strong enough to stand by itself, while at the same time it fits harmoniously into the sentence or paragraph like stone added to stone; the sentence consists usually of one, two, three or four lines, more rarely five or six or seven: a strong close for the line and a strong close for the sentence are almost indispensable except when some kind of inconclusive cadence is desirable; there must be no laxity or diffusiveness in the rhythm or in the metrical flow anywhere,—there must be a flow but not a loose flux. This gives an added importance to what comes at the close of the line and this placing is used very often to give emphasis and prominence to a key phrase or a key idea, especially those which have to be often reiterated in the thought and vision of the poem so as to recall attention to things that are universal or fundamental or otherwise of the first consequence—whether for the immediate subject or in the total plan. It is this use that is served here by the reiteration at the end of the line.

I have not anywhere in *Savitri* written anything for the sake of mere picturesqueness or merely to produce a rhetorical effect; what I am trying to do everywhere in the poem is to express exactly something seen, something felt or experienced; if, for instance, I indulge in the wealth-burdened line or passage, it is not merely for the pleasure of the indulgence, but because there is that burden, or at least what I conceive to be that, in the vision or the experience. When the expression has been found, I have to judge, not by the intellect or by any set poetical rule, but by an intuitive feeling, whether it is entirely the right expression and, if it is not, I have to change and go on changing until I have received the absolutely right inspiration and the right transcription of it and must never be satisfied with any *à peu pres* or imperfect transcription even if that makes good poetry of one kind or another. This is what I have tried to do. The critic or reader will judge for himself, whether I have succeeded or failed; but if he has seen nothing and understood nothing, it does not follow that his adverse judgment is sure to be the right and true one, there is at least a chance that he may so conclude, not because there is nothing to see and

nothing to understand, only poor pseudo-stuff or a rhetorical emptiness but because he was not equipped for the vision or the understanding. *Savitri* is the record of a seeing, of an experience which is not of the common kind and is often very far from what the general human mind sees and experiences. You must not expect appreciation or understanding from the general public or even from many at the first touch; there must be a new extension of consciousness and aesthesis to appreciate a new kind of mystic poetry. Moreover if it is really new in kind, it may employ a new technique, not perhaps absolutely new, but new in some or many of its elements: in that case old rules and canons and standards may be quite inapplicable; evidently, you cannot justly apply to the poetry of Whitman the principles of technique which are proper to the old metrical verse or the established laws of the old traditional poetry; so too when we deal with a modernist poet. We have to see whether what is essential to poetry is there and how far the new technique justifies itself by new beauty and perfection, and a certain freedom of mind from old conventions is necessary if our judgment is to be valid or rightly objective.

Your friend may say as he has said in another connection that all this is only special pleading or an apology rather than an apologia. But in that other connection he was mistaken and would be so here too, for in neither case have I the feeling that I had been guilty of some offence or some shortcoming and therefore there could be no place for an apology or special pleading such as is used to defend or cover up what one knows to be a false case. I have enough respect for truth not to try to cover up an imperfection; my endeavour would be rather to cure the recognised imperfection; if I have not poetical genius, at least I can claim a sufficient, if not an infinite capacity for painstaking: that I have sufficiently shown by my long labour on *Savitri.* Or rather, since it was not labour in the ordinary sense, not a labour of painstaking construction, I may describe it as an infinite capacity for waiting and listening for the true inspiration and rejecting all that fell short of it, however good it might seem from a lower standard until I got that which I felt to be absolutely right. The critic was evidently under a misconception with regard to my defence of the wealth-burdened line; he says that the principle enounced by me was sound but what mattered was my application of the principle, and he seems to think that I was trying to justify my application although I knew it to be bad and false by citing passages from Milton and Shakespeare as if my use of the wealth-burdened style were as good as theirs. But I was not defending the excellence of my practice, for the poetical value of my lines was not then in question; the question was whether it did not violate a valid law of a certain chaste economy by the use of too many epithets massed together: against this I was asserting the legitimacy of a massed richness, I was defending only its principle, not my use of the principle. Even a very small poet can cite in aid of his practice examples from greater poets without implying

that his poetry is on a par with theirs. But he further asserts that I showed small judgment in choosing my citations, because Milton's passage,

With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamantine chains and penal fire,

is not at all an illustration of the principle and Shakespeare's

Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the shipboy's eyes and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge?

is inferior in poetic value, lax and rhetorical in its richness and belongs to an inferior Shakespearean style. He says that Milton's astounding effect is due only to the sound and not to the words. That does not seem to me quite true: the sound, the rhythmic resonance, the rhythmic significance is undoubtedly the predominant factor; it makes us hear and feel the crash and clamour and clangour of the downfall of the rebel angels: but that is not all, we do not merely hear as if one were listening to the roar of ruin of a collapsing bomb-shattered house, but saw nothing, we have the vision and the full psychological commotion of the "hideous" and flaming ruin of the downfall, and it is the tremendous force of the words that makes us see as well as hear. Your friend's disparagement of the Shakespearean passage on "sleep" and the line on the sea considered by the greatest critics and not by myself only as ranking amongst the most admired and admirable things in Shakespeare is surprising and it seems to me to illustrate a serious limitation in his poetic perception and temperamental sympathies. Shakespeare's later terse and packed style with its more powerful dramatic effects can surely be admired without disparaging the beauty and opulence of his earlier style; if he had never written in that style, it would have been an unspeakable loss to the sum of the world's aesthetic possessions. The lines I have quoted are neither lax nor merely rhetorical, they have a terseness or at least a compactness of their own, different in character from the lines, let us say, in the scene of Antony's death or other memorable passages written in his great tragic style but none the less at every step packed with pregnant meanings and powerful significances which would not be possible if it were merely a loose rhetoric. Anyone writing such lines would deserve to rank by them alone among the great and even the greatest poets.

That is enough for the detail of the criticism and we can come to the general effect and his pronounced opinion upon my poetry. Apart from his high appreciation of *Flame-Wind* and *Descent*, *Jivan Mukta* and *Thought the Paraclete* and his general approval of the mystic poems published along with my essay on quantitative metre in English, it is sufficiently damning and discouraging and if I were to accept his verdict on my earlier and latest poetry, the first comparatively valueless and the last for the most part pseudo and phoney and for the rest offering only a few pleasant or pretty lines but not charged with the power and appeal of true or great poetry, I

would have to withdraw the *Collected Poems* from circulation, throw *Savitri* into the waste paper basket and keep only the mystical poems,—but these also have been banned by some critics, so I have no refuge left to me. As your friend is not a negligible critic and his verdict agrees with that of the eulogist of my philosophy in the *Times' Literary Supplement,* not to speak of others less authoritative like the communist reviewer of Iyengar's book who declared that it was not at all certain that I would live as a poet, it is perhaps incumbent on me to consider in all humility my dismal position and weigh whether it is really as bad as all that. There are some especial judgments in your friend's comments on the *Collected Poems* but these seem to concern only the translations. It is curious that he should complain of the lack of the impulse of self-expression in the *Songs of the Sea* as in this poem I was not busy with anything of the kind but was only rendering into English the self-expression of my friend and fellow-poet C. R. Das in his fine Bengali poem *Sagar Sangit.* I was not even self-moved to translate this work, however beautiful I found it; I might even be accused of having written the translation as a pot-boiler, for Das knowing my impecunious and precarious condition at Pondicherry offered me Rs. 1,000 for the work. Nevertheless I tried my best to give his beautiful Bengali lines as excellent a shape of English poetry as I could manage. The poet and littérateur Chapman condemned my work because I had made it too English, written too much in a manner imitative of traditional English poetry and had failed to make it Bengali in its character so as to keep its native spirit and essential substance. He may have been right; Das himself was not satisfied as he appended a more literal translation in free verse but this latter version does not seem to have caught on while some at least still read and admire the English disguise. If your friend is right in finding an overflow of sentiment in the *Songs,* that must be my own importation of an early romantic sentimentalism, a contribution of my own "self-expression" replacing Das's. The sea to the Indian imagination is a symbol of life,—one speaks of the ocean of the *Samsara* and Indian Yoga sees in its occult visions life in the image of a sea or different planes of being as so many oceans. Das's poem expresses his communing with this ocean of universal life and psychic intimacies with the Cosmic Spirit behind it and these have a character of grave emotion and intense feeling, not of mere sentimentalism, but they come from a very Indian and even a very Bengali mentality and may seem in translation to a different mind a profuse display of fancy and sentiment. The *Songs* are now far away from me in a dim backward of memory and I will have to read them again to be sure, but for that I have no time.

Again, I am charged with modern nineteenth century romanticism and a false imitation of the Elizabethan drama in my rendering of Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasie;* but Kalidasa's play *is* romantic in its whole tone and he might almost be described as an Elizabethan predating by a thousand years at least the Elizabethans; indeed most of the ancient Sanskrit dramas are

of this kind, though the tragic note is missing, and the general spirit resembles that of Elizabethan romantic comedy. So I do not think I committed any fault in making the translation romantic and in trying to make it Elizabethan, even if I only achieved a "sapless pseudo-Elizabethan" style. One who knew the Sanskrit original and who, although an Indian, was recognised as a good critic in England as well as a poet, one too whose attitude towards myself and my work had been consistently adverse, yet enthusiastically praised my version and said if Kalidasa could be translated at all, it was only so that he could be translated. This imprimatur of an expert may perhaps be weighed against the discouraging criticism of your friend. The comment on my translation of Bhartrihari is more to the point; but the fault is not Bhartrihari's whose epigrams are as concise and lapidary as the Greek, but in translating I indulged my tendency at the time which was predominantly romantic: the version presents faithfully enough the ideas of the Sanskrit poet but not the spirit and manner of his style. It is comforting, however, to find that it makes "attractive reading,"—I must be content with small mercies in an adversely critical world. After all, these poems are translations and not original work and not many can hope to come within a hundred miles of the more famous achievements of this kind such as Fitzgerald's splendid misrepresentation of Omar Khayyam, or Chapman's and Pope's mistranslations of Homer which may be described as first class original poems with a borrowed substance from a great voice of the past. The critic does not refer specifically to *Love and Death,* to which your enthusiasm first went out, to *Poems,* to *Urvasie* and to *Perseus the Deliverer* though this last he would class, I suppose, as sapless pseudo-Elizabethan drama; but that omission may be there because he only skimmed through them and afterwards could not get the first volume. But perhaps they may come under his general remark that this part of my work lacks the glow and concentration of true inspired poetry and his further judgment classing it with the works of Watson and Stephen Phillips and other writers belonging to the decline of romantic poetry. I know nothing about Watson's work except for one or two short pieces met by chance; if I were to judge from them, I would have to regard him as a genuine poet with a considerable elevation of language and metrical rhythm but somewhat thin in thought and substance; my poems may conceivably have some higher quality than his in this last respect since the reviewer in the *Times' Literary Supplement* grants deep thought and technical excellence as the only merits of my uninspired poetry. It is otherwise with Stephen Phillips: I read *Marpessa* and *Christ in Hades,* the latter in typescript, shortly before I left England and they aroused my admiration and made a considerable impression on me. I read recently a reference to Phillips as a forgotten poet, but if that includes these two poems I must consider the oblivion as a considerable loss to the generation which has forgotten them. His later poetry disappointed me, there was still some brilliance but nothing of that higher promise. The only other poet of that time who had some influence on me

was Meredith, especially his *Modern Love* which may have helped in forming the turn of my earlier poetic expression. I have not read the other later poets of the decline. Of subsequent writers or others not belonging to this decline I know only A.E. and Yeats, something of Francis Thompson, especially the *Hound of Heaven* and the *Kingdom of God,* and a poem or two of Gerard Hopkins; but the last two I came across very late, Hopkins only quite recently, and none of them had any influence on me, although one English reviewer in India spoke of me in eulogistic terms as a sort of combination of Swinburne and Hopkins and some have supposed that I got my turn for compound epithets from the latter! The only romantic poets of the Victorian Age who could have had any influence on me, apart from Arnold whose effect on me was considerable, were Tennyson perhaps, subconsciously, and Swinburne of the earlier poems, for his later work I did not at all admire. Still it is possible that the general atmosphere of the later Victorian decline, if decline it was, may have helped to mould my work and undoubtedly it dates and carries the stamp of the time in which it was written. It is a misfortune of my poetry from the point of view of recognition that the earlier work forming the bulk of the *Collected Poems* belongs to the past and has little chance of recognition now that the aesthetic atmosphere has so violently changed, while the later mystical work and *Savitri* belong to the future and will possibly have to wait for recognition of any merit they have for another strong change. As for the mystical poems which your friend praises in such high terms, they are as much challenged by others as the rest of my work. Some reviewers have described them as lacking altogether in spiritual feeling and void of spiritual experience; they are, it seems, mere mental work, full of intellectually constructed images and therefore without the genuine value of spiritual or mystic poetry.

Well, then, what is the upshot? What have I to decide as a result of my aesthetic examination of conscience? It is true that there are voices on the other side, not only from my disciples but from others who have no such connection with me. I have heard of individuals nameless or fameless in England who chanced to come across *Love and Death* and had the same spontaneous enthusiasm for it as yourself; others have even admired and discovered in my earlier work the beauty and the inspiration which your friend and the *Times*' reviewer find to be badly lacking in it. It is true that they have differed in the poems they have chosen; Andrews cited particularly the *Rishi* and the epigram on Goethe as proof of his description of me as a great poet; an English critic, Richardson, singled out *Urvasie* and *Love and Death* and the more romantic poems, but thought that some of my later work was less inspired, too intellectual and philosophical, too much turned towards thought, while some work done in the middle he denounced altogether, complaining that after feeding my readers on nectar for so long

I came later on to give them mere water. This critic made a distinction between great poets and good poets and said that I belonged to the second and not to the first category, but as he classed Shelley and others of the same calibre as examples of the good poets, his praise was sufficiently "nectarous" for anybody to swallow with pleasure! Krishnaprem (Ronald Nixon), Moore and others have also had a contrary opinion to the adverse critics and these, both English and Indian, were men whose capacity for forming a true literary judgment is perhaps as good as any on the other side. Krishnaprem I mention, because his judgment forms a curious and violent contrast to your friend's: the latter finds no overtones in my poetry while Krishnaprem who similarly discourages Harindranath Chattopadhayaya's poetry on the ground of a lack of overtones finds them abundant in mine. One begins to wonder what overtones really are, or are we to conclude that they have no objective existence but are only a term for some subjective personal reaction in the reader? I meet the same absolute contradiction everywhere; one critic says about *Perseus* that there is some good poetry in it but it is not in the least dramatic except for one scene and that the story of the play is entirely lacking in interest, while another finds in it most of all a drama of action and the story thrilling and holding a breathless interest from beginning to end. Highest eulogy, extreme disparagement, faint praise, mixed laudation and censure—it is a see-saw on which the unfortunate poet who is incautious enough to attach any value to contemporary criticism is balanced without any possibility of escape. Or I may flatter myself with the idea that this lively variation of reaction from extreme eulogy to extreme damnation indicates that my work must have after all something in it that is real and alive. Or I might perhaps take refuge in the supposition that the lack of recognition is the consequence of an untimely and too belated publication, due to the egoistic habit of writing for my own self-satisfaction rather than any strong thirst for poetical glory and immortality and leaving most of my poetry in the drawer for much longer than, even for twice or thrice, the time recommended by Horace who advised the poet to put by his work and read it again after ten years and then only, if he still found it of some value, to publish it. *Urvasie*, the second of the only two poems published early, was sent at first to Lionel Johnson, a poet and littérateur of some reputation who was the Reader of a big firm. He acknowledged some poetic merit, but said that it was a repetition of Matthew Arnold and so had no sufficient reason for existence. But Lionel Johnson, I was told, like the Vedantic sage who sees Brahman in all things, saw Arnold everywhere, and perhaps if I had persisted in sending it to other firms, some other Reader, not similarly obsessed, might have found the merit and, as romanticism was still the fashion, some of the critics and the public too might have shared your and Richardson's opinion of this and other work and, who knows, I might have ranked in however low a place among the poets of the romantic decline. Perhaps then I need

not decide too hastily against any republication of the *Collected Poems* or could even cherish the hope that, when the fashion of anti-romanticism has passed, it may find its proper place, whatever that may be, and survive.

As regards your friend's appraisal of the mystical poems, I need say little. I accept his reservation that there is much inequality as between the different poems: they were produced very rapidly—in the course of a week, I think—and they were not given the long reconsideration that I have usually given to my poetic work before publication; he has chosen the best, though there are others also that are good, though not so good; in others, the metre attempted and the idea and language have not been lifted to their highest possible value. I would like to say a word about his hesitation over some lines in *Thought the Paraclete* which describe the spiritual planes. I can understand this hesitation; for these lines have not the vivid and forceful precision of the opening and the close and are less pressed home, they are general in description and therefore to one who has not the mystic experience may seem too large and vague. But they are not padding; a precise and exact description of these planes of experience would have made the poem too long, so only some large lines are given, but the description is true, the epithets hit the reality and even the colours mentioned in the poem, "gold-red feet" and "crimson-white mooned oceans" are faithful to experience. Significant colour, supposed by intellectual criticism to be symbolic but there is more than that, is a frequent element in mystic vision; I may mention the powerful and vivid vision in which Ramakrishna went up into the higher planes and saw the mystic truth behind the birth of Vivekananda. At least, the fact that these poems have appealed so strongly to your friend's mind may perhaps be taken by me as a sufficient proof that in this field my effort at interpretation of spiritual things has not been altogether a failure.

But how then are we to account for the same critic's condemnation or small appreciation of *Savitri* which is also a mystic and symbolic poem although cast into a different form and raised to a different pitch, and what value am I to attach to his criticism? Partly, perhaps, it is this very difference of form and pitch which accounts for his attitude and, having regard to his aesthetic temperament and its limitations, it was inevitable. He himself seems to suggest this reason when he compares this difference to the difference of his approach as between *Lycidas* and *Paradise Lost*. His temperamental turn is shown by his special appreciation of Francis Thompson and Coventry Patmore and his response to *Descent* and *Flame-Wind* and the fineness of his judgment when speaking of the *Hound of Heaven* and the *Kingdom of God*, its limitation by his approach towards *Paradise Lost*. I think he would be naturally inclined to regard any very high-pitched poetry as rhetorical and unsound and declamatory, wherever he did not see in it something finely and subtly true coexisting with the high-pitched

expression,—the combination we find in Thompson's later poem and it is this he seems to have missed in *Savitri.* For *Savitri* does contain or at least I intended it to contain what you and others have felt in it but he has not been able to feel because it is something which is outside his own experience and to which he has no access. One who has had the kind of experience which *Savitri* sets out to express or who, not having it, is prepared by his temperament, his mental turn, his previous intellectual knowledge or psychic training, to have some kind of access to it, the feeling of it if not the full understanding, can enter into the spirit and sense of the poem and respond to its poetic appeal; but without that it is difficult for an unprepared reader to respond,—all the more if this is, as you contend, a new poetry with a new law of expression and technique.

Lycidas is one of the finest poems in any literature, one of the most consistently perfect among works of an equal length and one can apply to it the epithet "exquisite" and it is to the exquisite that your friend's aesthetic temperament seems specially to respond. It would be possible to a reader with a depreciatory turn to find flaws in it, such as the pseudo-pastoral setting, the too powerful intrusion of St. Peter and puritan theological controversy into that incongruous setting and the image of the hungry sheep which someone not in sympathy with Christian feeling and traditional imagery might find even ludicrous or at least odd in its identification of pseudo-pastoral sheep and theological human sheep: but these would be hypercritical objections and are flooded out by the magnificence of the poetry. I am prepared to admit the very patent defects of *Paradise Lost:* Milton's heaven is indeed unconvincing and can be described as grotesque and so too is his gunpowder battle up there, and his God and angels are weak and unconvincing figures, even Adam and Eve, our first parents, do not effectively fill their part except in his outward description of them; and the later narrative falls far below the grandeur of the first four Books but those four Books stand for ever among the greatest things in the world's poetic literature. If *Lycidas* with its beauty and perfection had been the supreme thing done by Milton even with all the lyrical poetry and the sonnets added to it, Milton would still have been a great poet but he would not have ranked among the dozen greatest; it is *Paradise Lost* that gives him that place. There are deficiencies if not failures in almost all the great epics, the *Odyssey* and perhaps the *Divina Commedia* being the only exceptions, but still they are throughout in spite of them great epics. So too is *Paradise Lost.* The grandeur of his verse and language is constant and unsinking to the end and makes the presentation always sublime. We have to accept for the moment Milton's dry Puritan theology and his all too human picture of the celestial world and its denizens and then we can feel the full greatness of the epic. But the point is that this greatness in itself seems to have less appeal to your friend's aesthetic temperament;

it is as if he felt less at home in its atmosphere, in an atmosphere of grandeur and sublimity than in the air of a less sublime but a fine and always perfect beauty. It is the difference between a magic hill-side woodland of wonder and a great soaring mountain climbing into a vast purple sky: to accept fully the greatness he needs to find in it a finer and sublimer strain as in Thompson's *Kingdom of God.* On a lower scale this, his sentence about it seems to suggest, is the one fundamental reason for his complete pleasure in the mystical poems and his very different approach to *Savitri.* The pitch aimed at by *Savitri,* the greatness you attribute to it, would of itself have discouraged in him any abandonment to admiration and compel from the beginning a cautious and dubious approach; that soon turned to lack of appreciation or a lowered appreciation even of the best that may be there and to depreciation and censure of the rest.*

But there is the other reason which is more effective. He sees and feels nothing of the spiritual meaning and the spiritual appeal which you find in *Savitri*; it is for him empty of anything but an outward significance and that seems to him poor, as is natural since the outward meaning is only a part and a surface and the rest is to his eyes invisible. If there had been what he hoped or might have hoped to find in my poetry, a spiritual vision such as that of the Vedantin, arriving beyond the world towards the Ineffable, then he might have felt at home as he does with Thompson's poetry or might at least have found it sufficiently accessible. But this is not what *Savitri* has to say or rather it is only a small part of it and, even so, bound up with a cosmic vision and an acceptance of the world which in its kind is

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* The Critic's Note: "To illustrate my discomfiture at the slightness of the appeal of Sri Aurobindo's epic in comparison with that of his mystical lyrics, I put myself in the place, the suppositious place, of a reader who discovers a similar gulf between the effect made upon himself by a smaller and comparatively slighter poem like 'Lycidas' and by 'Paradise Lost'. This sentence Sri Aurobindo, in his haste or owing to my own faulty expression, seems to have misconstrued; and perhaps taking it in conjunction with the impression made by other remarks in my letter, he has concluded that I am naturally more receptive of the 'exquisite' in poetry than of the 'high-pitched' and 'sublime' generally."

Editor's Note on the above: The critic's sentence ran: "I feel rather like one who, having read 'Lycidas' with extreme delight, finds to his dismay that he must greet 'Paradise Lost' with strictly modified rapture." Whatever the exact shade of meaning intended in these rather ambiguous words, I think it can be affirmed from personal knowledge of the critic's sensibilities that as a rule his response to the 'exquisite' comes at least more easily, more quickly. Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the sentence was necessarily part of his general intuitive as well as intellectual impression of the critic's mind and aesthetic tendencies from the whole letter.

unfamiliar to his mind and psychic sense and foreign to his experience. The two passages with which he deals do not and cannot give any full presentation of this way of seeing things since one is an unfamiliar symbol and the other an incidental and, taken by itself apart from its context, an isolated circumstance. But even if he had had other more explicit and clearly revealing passages at his disposal, I do not think he would have been satisfied or much illuminated; his eyes would still have been fixed on the surface and caught only some intellectual meaning or outer sense. That at least is what we may suppose to have been the cause of his failure,† if we maintain that there is anything at all in the poem; or else we must fall back on the explanation of a fundamental personal incompatibility and the rule *de gustibus non est disputandum,* or to put it in the Sanskrit form *nana ruchirhi lokah.* If you are right in maintaining that *Savitri* stands as a new mystical poetry with a new vision and expression of things, we should expect, at least at first, a widespread, perhaps, a general failure even in lovers of poetry to understand it or appreciate; even those who have some mystical turn or spiritual experience are likely to pass it by if it is a different turn from theirs or outside their range of experience. It took the world something like a hundred years to discover Blake; it would not be improbable that there might be a greater time-lag here, though naturally we hope for better things. For in India at least some understanding or feeling and an audience few and fit may be possible. Perhaps by some miracle there may be before long a larger appreciative audience.

At any rate this is the only thing one can do, especially when one is attempting a new creation, to go on with the work with such light and power as is given to one and leave the value of the work to be determined by the future. Contemporary judgments we know to be unreliable; there are only two judges whose joint verdict cannot easily be disputed, the World and Time. The Roman proverb says, *securus judicat orbis terrarum;* but the world's verdict is secure only when it is confirmed by Time.

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† The Critic's Note: "It is not unlikely that there is a strangeness in the passages—their mere novelty, which inhibits a full giving of myself to them: this strangeness will pass when the poet has come to an end of his long labour, unhasting, unresting, and I have 'Savitri' in full to read, re-read, and return to... It is possible that, while the sublime and high-pitched is not wholly sealed up from my apprehension, that of the Dawn-prelude (like that of the other passages) is fused with certain other qualities, spiritual and intellectual, of a kind that renders the verse imperfectly conductive of its force to myself. Some instinct of the mystical I needs must have, if for none other reason, at least for that I am an Indian. But my knowledge of the sacred lore is neither extensive nor peculiar, and 'psychic training' or 'equipment' I have none... And this quite apart from the extra-ordinary character of the spirituality, the cosmicity, that informs the epic..."

For it is not the opinion of the general mass of men that finally decides, the decision is really imposed by the judgment of a minority and élite which is finally accepted and settles down as the verdict of posterity; in Tagore's phrase it is the universal man, *Viswa Manava* or rather something universal using the general mind of man, we might say the Cosmic self in the race that fixes the value of its own works. In regard to the great names in literature this final verdict seems to have in it something of the absolute,—so far as anything can be that in a temporal world of relativities in which the Absolute reserves itself hidden behind the veil of human ignorance. It is no use for some to contend that Virgil is a tame and elegant writer of a wearisome work in verse on agriculture and a tedious pseudo-epic written to imperial order and Lucretius the only really great poet in Latin literature or to depreciate Milton for his Latin English and inflated style and the largely uninteresting character of his two epics; the world either refuses to listen or there is a temporary effect, a brief fashion in literary criticism, but finally the world returns to its established verdict. Lesser reputations may fluctuate, but finally whatever has real value in its own kind settles itself and finds its just place in the durable judgment of the world. Work which was neglected and left aside like Blake's or at first admired with reservation and eclipsed like Donne's is singled out by a sudden glance of Time and its greatness recognised; or what seemed buried slowly emerges or re-emerges; all finally settles into its place. What was held as sovereign in its own time is rudely dethroned but afterwards recovers not its sovereign throne but its due position in the world's esteem; Pope is an example and Byron who at once burst into a supreme glory and was the one English poet, after Shakespeare, admired all over Europe but is now depreciated, may also recover his proper place. Encouraged by such examples, let us hope that these violently adverse judgments may not be final and absolute and decide that the waste paper basket is not the proper place for *Savitri*. There may still be a place for a poetry which seeks to enlarge the field of poetic creation and find for the inner spiritual life of man and his now occult or mystical knowledge and experience of the whole hidden range of his and the world's being not a corner and a limited expression such as it had in the past but a wide space and as manifold and integral an expression of the boundless and innumerable riches that lie hidden and unexplored as if kept apart under the direct gaze of the Infinite as has been found in the past for man's surface and finite view and experience of himself and the material world in which he has lived striving to know himself and it as best he can with a limited mind and senses. The door that has been shut to all but a few may open; the kingdom of the Spirit may be established not only in man's inner being but in his life and his works. Poetry also may have its share in that revolution and become part of the spiritual empire.

I had intended as the main subject of this letter to say something about

technique and the inner working of the intuitive method by which *Savitri* was and is being created and of the intention and plan of the poem. Your friend's idea of its way of creation, an intellectual construction by a deliberate choice of words and imagery, badly chosen at that, is the very opposite of the real way in which it was done. That was to be the body of the letter and the rest only a preface. But the preface has become so long that it has crowded out the body. I shall have to postpone it to a later occasion when I have more time. (4-5-1947)

LITERARY VALUES AND SOME PERSONAL POINTS

(AE has made a few interesting remarks on some of my poems—remarks curious in some places while finely perceptive in others. He warns against frequent use of words like "infinite", "eternal", "limitless". The difficulty about such words had struck me before—frequent use of them gives a not altogether agreeable Hugoesque flavour to mystic Indian poetry; but I wonder whether I have cheapened or misused them. At least you have never taken me to task on that score.

As regards those two poems of mine which you have liked immensely, he notes with pleasure only one phrase in *Ne Plus Ultra*—"the song-impetuous mind"—and has nothing to say about *This Errant Life*. Isn't that strange?

By the way, the copy of your *Love and Death* is ready to go to England. I wonder how the critics will receive the poem. They should be enthusiastic. It is full of superb passages. Do you remember Ruru's going down to Patala, the underworld, I have commented on its inspiration in my essay *Sri Aurobindo—the Poet*. I can never stop thrilling to it. Here are the lines:

In a thin soft eve
Ganges spread far her multitudinous waves,
A glimmering restlessness with voices large,
And from the forests of that half-seen bank
A boat came heaving over it, white-winged,
With a sole silent helmsman marble-pale.
Then Ruru by his side stepped in; they went
Down the mysterious river and beheld
The great banks widen out of sight. The world
Was water and the skies to water plunged.
All night with a dim motion gliding down
He felt the dark against his eyelids; felt,
As in a dream more real than daylight,
The helmsman with his dumb and marble face
Near him and moving wideness all around,
And that continual gliding dimly on,
As one who on a shoreless water sails
For ever to a port he shall not win.

But when the darkness paled, he heard a moan
Of mightier waves and had the wide great sense
Of ocean and the depths below our feet.
But the boat stopped; the pilot lifted on him
His marble gaze coeval with the stars.
Then in the white-winged boat the boy arose
And saw around him the vast sea all grey
And heaving in the pallid dawning light.
Loud Ruru cried across the murmur: "Hear me,
O inarticulate grey Ocean, hear.
If any cadence in thy infinite
Rumour was caught from lover's moan, O Sea,
Open thy abysses to my mortal tread.
For I would travel to the despairing shades,
The spheres of suffering where entangled dwell
Souls unreleased and the untimely dead
Who weep remembering. Thither, O guide me,
No despicable wayfarer, but Ruru,
But son of a great Rishi, from all men
On earth selected for peculiar pangs,
Special disaster. Lo, this petalled fire,
How freshly it blooms and lasts with my great pain!"
He held the flower out subtly glimmering.
And like a living thing the huge sea trembled,
Then rose, calling, and filled the sight with waves,
Converging all its giant crests; towards him
Innumerable waters loomed and heaven
Threatened. Horizon on horizon moved
Dreadfully swift; then with a prone wide sound
All Ocean hollowing drew him swiftly in,
Curving with monstrous menace over him.
He down the gulf where the loud waves collapsed
Descending, saw, with floating hair arise
The daughters of the sea in pale green light,
A million mystic breasts suddenly bare,
And came beneath the flood and stunned beheld
A mute stupendous march of waters race
To reach some viewless pit beneath the world.)

"I did not object to your frequent use of 'infinite', eternal', 'limitless', because these are adjectives that I myself freely pepper over my poetry. When one writes about the Infinite, the Eternal and the Limitless or when one feels them constantly, what is one to do? AE who has not this conciousness but only that of the temporal and finite (natural or occult) can avoid these words, but I can't. Besides, all poets have their favourite words

and epithets which they constantly repeat. AE himself has been charged with a similar crime.

"If you send your poems to five different poets, you are likely to get five absolutely disparate and discordant estimates of them. A poet likes only the poetry that appeals to his own temperament or taste, the rest he condemns or ignores. Contemporary poetry, besides, seldom gets its right judgment from contemporary critics, even. You expect for instance *Love and Death* to make a sensation in England—I don't expect it in the least: I shall be agreeably surprised if it gets more than some qualified praise, and if it does not get even that, I shall be neither astonished nor discomfited. I know the limitations of the poem and its qualities and I know that the part about the descent into Hell can stand comparison with some of the best English poetry; but I don't expect any contemporaries to see it. If they do, it will be good luck or divine grace, that is all. Nothing can be more futile than for a poet to write in expectation of contemporary fame or praise, however agreeable that may be, if it comes: but it is not of much value; for very few poets have enjoyed a great contemporary fame and very great poets have been neglected in their time. A poet has to go on his way, trying to gather hints from what people say for or against, when their criticisms are things he can profit by, but not otherwise moved (if he can manage it)—seeking mainly to sharpen his own sense of self-criticism by the help of others. Differences of estimate need not surprise him at all." (2-2-32)

(The other day Arjava told me that he considered the long speech of the Love-God Kama or Madan about himself in *Love and Death* one of the peaks in that poem—he as good as compared it to the descent into Hell about which I have raved ever since I read the poem some years back. He added that the Mother too had been very much moved by it. Somehow I couldn't at the time wax extremely enthusiastic about it. I found it moving and excellent of its own kind, very powerful and displaying great psychological acumen; but, except for the opening eight or ten lines and some three or four in the middle, I couldn't regard it as astonishing poetry—at least not one of the peaks. What is your own private opinion? I need not, of course, quote it to anyone. Here is the passage, to refresh your memory:

But with the thrilled eternal smile that makes
The spring, the lover of Rathi golden-limbed
Replied to Ruru, "Mortal, I am he;
I am that Madan who inform the stars
With lustre and on life's wide canvas fill
Pictures of light and shade, of joy and tears,
Make ordinary moments wonderful
And common speech a charm: knit life to life

With interfusions of opposing souls
And sudden meetings and slow sorceries:
Wing the boy bridegroom to that panting breast,
Smite Gods with mortal faces, dreadfully
Among great beautiful kings and watched by eyes
That burn, force on the virgin's fainting limbs
And drive her to the one face never seen,
The one breast meant eternally for her.
By me come wedded sweets, by me the wife's
Busy delight and passionate obedience,
And loving eager service never sated,
And happy lips, and worshipping soft eyes:
And mine the husband's hungry arms and use
Unwearying of old tender words and ways,
Joy of her hair and silent pleasure felt
Of nearness to one dear familiar shape.
Nor only these, but many affections bright
And soft glad things cluster around my name.
I plant fraternal tender yearnings, make
The sister's sweet attractiveness and leap
Of heart towards imperious kindred blood,
And the young mother's passionate deep look,
Earth's high similitude of One not earth,
Teach filial heart-beats strong. These are my gifts
For which men praise me, these my glories calm:
But fiercer shafts I can, wild storms blown down
Shaking fixed minds and melting marble natures,
Tears and dumb bitterness and pain unpitied,
Racked thirsting jealousy and kind hearts made stone:
And in undisciplined huge souls I sow
Dire vengeance and impossible cruelties,
Cold lusts that linger and fierce fickleness,
The loves close kin to hate, brute violences
And mad insatiable longings pale,
And passion blind as death and deaf as swords.
O mortal, all deep-souled desires and all
Yearnings immense are mine, so much I can.")

"My own private opinion agrees with Arjava's estimate rather than with yours. These lines may not be astonishing in the sense of an unusual effort of constructive imagination and vision like the descent into Hell; but I do not think I have, elsewhere, surpassed this speech in power of language, passion and truth of feeling and nobility and felicity of rhythm all fused together into a perfect whole. And I think I have succeeded in expressing the truth of the godhead of Kama, the godhead of vital love (I.

am not using 'vital' in the strict Yogic sense; I mean the love that draws lives passionately together or throws them into or upon each other) with a certain completeness of poetic sight and perfection of poetic power, which puts it on one of the peaks—even if not the highest possible peak—of achievement. That is my private opinion—but, of course, all do not need to see alike in these matters." (10-2-32)

(As *Love and Death* I have long since adopted as my poetic Bible owing to the consummate beauty of its inspiration and art, and as now I am just awaking to a capacity in myself for blank verse, I shall be really happy if you will tell me the way in which you created this poem—the first falling of the seed of the idea, the growth and maturing of it, the influences assimilated from other poets, the mood and atmosphere you used to find most congenial and productive, the experience and the frequency of the afflatus, the pace at which you composed, the evolution of that multifarious, many-echoed yet perfectly original style and of a blank verse whose art is the most unfailing and, except for one too close repetition of the mannerism of the double "but", the most unobtrusively conscious that I have seen. In my essay on your poetry I tried to show the white harmony, so to speak, of *Love and Death* in a kind of spectrum analysis, how colours from Latin, Italian, Sanscrit and English verse had fused here together with an absolutely original ultra-violet and infra-red not to be traced anywhere. Among English influences the most outstanding are, to my mind, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats and Stephen Phillips. In my essay I dwelt at length on the first two and on the magic way in which the passage about Ruru's sail along the Ganges and subsequent sea-plunge into Patala combines at the same time the early and later Milton and, with that, something of Shelley and Coleridge. Keats and Stephen Phillips I did not specially deal with. Keats seems to have added to the element of supple strength in your poem, while Phillips has tinged it with a certain poignant vividness and colourful delicacy. More fundamental, however, than effect of his manner was, I think, the spell cast by certain moods, as it were, of his *Marpessa*... But all this is guess-work —correct maybe in some respects, but I should like very much to have your own illuminating account of the matter, as well as answer to the other points in my question at the beginning of this letter.)

"I cannot tell you much about it from that point of view; I did not draw consciously from any of the poets you mention except from Phillips. I read *Marpessa* and *Christ in Hades* before they were published and as I was just in the stage of formation then—at the age of 17—they made a powerful impression which lasted until it was worked out in *Love and Death*. I dare say some influence of most of the great English poets and of others also, not English, can be traced in my poetry—I can myself see that of Milton, sometimes of Wordsworth and Arnold; but it was of the

automatic kind—they came in unnoticed. I am not aware of much influence of Shelley and Coleridge, but since I read Shelley a great deal and took an intense pleasure in some of Coleridge's poetry, they may have been there without my knowledge. The one work of Keats that influenced me was *Hyperion*—I dare say my blank verse got something of his stamp through that. The poem itself was written in a white heat of inspiration during 14 days of continuous writing—in the mornings, of course, for I had to attend office the rest of the day and saw friends in the evening. I never wrote anything with such ease and rapidity before or after. Your other questions I can't very well answer—I have lived ten lives since then and don't remember. I don't think there was any falling of the seed of the idea or growth and maturing of it; it just came,—from my reading about the story of Ruru in the *Mahabharata;* I thought, 'Well, here's a subject', and the rest burst out of itself. Mood and atmosphere? I never depended on these things that I know of—something wrote in me or didn't write, more often didn't, and that is all I know about it. Evolution of style and verse? Well, it evolved, I suppose—I assure you I didn't build it. I was not much of a critic in those days—the critic grew in me by Yoga like the philosopher, and as for self-criticism the only standard I had was whether I felt satisfied with what I wrote or not, and generally I felt it was very fine when I wrote it and found it was very bad after it had been written, but I could not at that time have given you a reason either for the self-eulogy or the self-condemnation. Nowadays it is different, of course; for I am conscious of what I do and how things are done. I am afraid this will not enlighten you much but it is all I can tell you."

(3-7-33)

(Your reply is not only enlightening but most enkindling too. Who can help being thrilled by the news that *Love and Death* was written in a white heat of inspiration during fourteen days of continuous writing in the mornings? The marvel grows and grows in one. I feel like flaming up in a passionately poetic panegyric or giving an effulgent echo to the fact of such inspiration on your part by a new blank verse ecstasy on mine!

Of course, most of the influences on your style and verse were unconscious. As I said in my essay, "Here is no slavish limitation or echo; rather, a versatile originality winning rapid access to the worlds of visions and voices to which only the masters have the key." That you had an intense admiration for *Marpessa* and *Christ in Hades*, more particularly for the former, is evident, but it would not be correct to declare that your rhythm or manner is all Stephen Phillips. Phillips's style, in my opinion, is a combination of two manners, only one of which finds some sort of reflection in yours, but in a richly strengthened and heightened form, because there are innumerable shades in your style, some of which may be compared to a few of Keats's. All comparison, however, touches only the out-

skirts of the matter. *Love and Death* remains most unquestionably, most admirably individual and original. But I am glad that it forms a kind of epitome also of the diverse exquisitenesses and magnificences of all past poetry, for it comes to me as a Book of books, a veritable Bible satisfying all my poetic needs, owing to its being a word-presence of a *"Pulchritudo antiqua et semper nova"*, and I can say to it: "I love thee—at once

Because Infinity upon thee broods,
And thou art full of whispers and of shadows.

I love thee not only for

Thy freshness stealing on me like strange sleep.

but also because

Thy face remembered is from other worlds."

Now just a few questions before I close. Was *Love and Death* your first achievement in blank verse—a perfect Pallas sprung full-blown from the Zeus-head of your inspiration; or did a lot of trial and experiment precede it? Was your brilliant translation from Kalidasa its forerunner?

P.S. I should like to make clear one point in my letter. When I say that *Love and Death* is so dear to me not only because it is an original achievement but also because it is "full of whispers and of shadows", it must not be understood that this poem is teeming with direct reminiscence of past poetry. In two or three places there is more or less such a reminiscence, but "whispers and shadows" imply that, if all the verse of the world were to perish, one could regard *Love and Death* as a pointer to, or rather a quintessence of, almost the whole poetic wealth of the past. I say almost, because there is one *lacuna*—the accent of mystical meditation; but otherwise all the sweetness, sublimity, swiftness, "slow sorcery" of style one finds in Virgil, Dante, Kalidasa, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats one finds here: no beautiful effect of phrase or rhythm one can mark anywhere which is not, in some original way of your own, recreated by you here).

"There was no trial or experiment—as I wrote, I did not proceed like that,—I put down what came, changing afterwards; but there too only as it came. At that time I had no theories, no methods or process. But *Love and Death* was not my first blank verse poem—I had written one before in the first years of my stay in Baroda which was privately published, but afterwards I got disgusted with it and rejected it.* I made also some translations from the Sanskrit (in blank verse and heroic verse); but I don't remember to what you are referring as the translation of Kalidasa. Most

* Editor's Note: The poem in question is "Urvasie", a long narrative which some critics are inclined to consider the best of Sri Aurobindo's early blank verses. The reaction in himself against it which Sri Aurobindo speaks of persisted for many years during which he had no opportunity to see the poem again. On 5-2-31 he wrote to me: "I don't think I have the 'Urvasie', neither am I very anxious to have the poem saved from oblivion." Later when a copy of the poem was secured he found it not at all a thing to be thrown away and allowed its inclusion in "Collected Poems and Plays."

of all that has disappeared into the unknown in the whirlpools and turmoil of my political career." (4-7-33)

(It is curious how you repeatedly forget that you have so wonderfully Englished Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasie* or *The Hero and the Nymph.* Once before also I had to remind you of it. Surely it cannot be that you want it to be rejected. By the way, you are supposed also to have translated Kalidasa's *Meghadut* or *The Cloud-Messenger*—in *terza rima.*)

"No, I do not reject *The Hero and the Nymph.* I had merely forgotten all about it.... I did translate the *Meghadut*, but it was lost by the man with whom I kept it." (5-7-33)

(I should like to know what exactly the meaning of the word "absolve" is in the following lines from your *Love and Death.* I have been puzzled because the ordinary dictionary meanings don't seem to fit in.

But if with price, ah God! what easier! Tears
Dreadful, innumerable I will absolve
Or pay with anguish through the centuries...

There is another passage a few pages later where the same word is used:

For late
I saw her mid those pale inhabitants
Whom bodily anguish visits not, but thoughts
Sorrowful and dumb memories absolve,
And martyrdom of scourged hearts quivering.)

"In the second passage it is used in its ordinary sense. 'Absolution' means release from sins or from debts—the sorrowful thoughts and memories are the penalty or payment which procures the release from the debt which has been accumulated by the sins and errors of human life.

"In the first passage 'absolve' is used in its Latin and not in its English sense, = 'to pay off a debt', but here the sense is stretched a little. Instead of saying 'I will pay off with tears', Ruru says: 'I will pay off tears' as the price of the absolution. This Latinisation and the inversion of syntactical connections are familiar licenses in English poetry—of course, it is incorrect, but a deliberate incorrectness, a violence purposely done to the language in order to produce a poetic effect. The English language, unlike the French and some others, likes, as Stephen Phillips used to say, to have liberties taken with it. But, of course, before one can take these liberties, one must be a master of the language—and, in this case, of the Latin also." (1931)

(How is it that one slips so easily into the iambic pentameter when one wants to say things of most significance? Have you also a penchant for it?)

"An inspiration which leans more on a sublimated or illumined thought than on some strong or subtle or very simple psychic or vital intensity and swiftness of feeling, seems to call naturally for the iambic pentameter, though it need not confine itself to that form. I myself have not yet found another metre which gives room enough along with an apposite movement—shorter metres are too cramped, the longer ones need a technical dexterity (if one is not to be either commonplace or clumsy) for which I have not leisure." (5-3-32)

(Could you say a few things about the new hexameter you have evolved? What is the reason why English poets in the past failed?)

"Former poets failed because they did not find the right basic line and measure; they forgot that stress and quantity must both be considered in English; even though in theory the stress alone makes the quantity, there is another kind of true quantity which must be given a subordinate but very necessary recognition; besides, even in stress there are two kinds, true and fictitious. In analysing the movement of an English line, you ought to have to make three independent scansions according to these three bases, and the combination gives the value of the rhythm. You can ignore all this in an established metre and go safe by the force of instinct and habit; but in making so difficult an innovation as the hexameter, these were not enough, a clear eye upon all these constituents was needed —and it was not there. Longfellow, even Clough went on the theory of stress-quantity alone and made a mess—producing verse that discredited the very idea of creating an English hexameter. Other poets made no strong or sustained endeavour. Arnold was interesting so long as he theorised about it, but his practical specimens were disastrous.

"I may explain more when sending you the first fifty lines of *Ilion*, but as I have not the books with me I don't know that I can make myself clearer." (23-7-32)

(There are other classical metres than the hexameter, in which also there has been very little success on the part of English poets. Your own experiments seem to me fine—achieving just what was lacking.)

"In the attempt to acclimatise the classical scansions in English, everything depends on whether they are acclimatised or not. That is to say, there must be a spontaneous, natural, seemingly native-born singing or flowing or subtly moving rhythm. The lines must glide or run or walk easily or, if you like, execute a complex dance, stately or light, but not stumble, not shamble and not walk like the Commander's statue suddenly endowed with life but stiff and stony in its march. Now the last is just what happens to classical metres in English when they are not acclimatised, naturalised, made to seem even naturally English although new.

It is like cardboard cut into measures, there is no life or movement of life... It was inability to naturalise that marred the chances of the admission of classical metres in the attempts of earlier poets—we must avoid the mistake."

(23-11-33)

(Here is an experiment of mine in a classical metre. I am not at all convinced that it is a success. But could you tell me why exactly I failed?)

"I think you failed because you had no unwritten rhythm behind your mind when you started writing and none came through by accident—or what seems one—as sometimes happens. There is an inspiration of language and there is an inspiration of rhythm and the two must fuse together for poetic perfection to come. As it is, you set out to manufacture your rhythm and piece together its parts—that must be the cause of this result. Your failure does not predestine you to eventual failure. Most people fail first when they try this kind of departure from the established norms—this rejuvenation of the old in the new. I do not remember my own previous attempts in the classical metres but I feel sure they were failures of the kind I stigmatise. If I succeed now, it will be by the grace of God, in other words the established Yoga consciousness, for in that consciousness things come through from behind the veil with ease,—so long as a veil exists at all. Of course with genius too in its moments of inspiration—surer than the layman imagines; but genius also is a kind of accidental Yoga, a contact, an opening into an occult Power."

(25-11-33)

(I have begun a poem on Parvati in blank verse quatrains. Here are the first five stanzas. If at all you think I should continue, will not the closed stanza plan adopted so far prove monotonous?

Men dreamed of her strange hair and saw it fall
A cataract of nectar through their sleep,
Crushing the soul with sweetness—and woke a-dread,
In all their limbs a speechless heaven of pain!

Her voice reached to Creation's highest peak,
And though a music most delicate its rapture
Swept through the seven worlds and found the gods
Helpless like flames swaying in a huge wind!

A terror beautiful were those dark eddies,
Her fathomless vague-glimmering pure eyes,
Wherein the spirits that rashly plunged their love
Whirled through a lifetime of bewildered bliss!

But all in vain her voice and gaze and hair
Before the snowy calm immutable
Of Shiva's meditation, a frozen fire
Of omnipotence alone with its self-splendour!

Like an immortal death his far face glowed—
Inaudible disclosure of some white
Eternity of unperturbed dream-vast,
Behind the colour and passion of time's heart-beat!)

"It looks as if you were facing the problem of blank verse by attempting it under conditions of the maximum difficulty. Not content with choosing a form which is based on the single line blank verse (I mean, of course, each line a clear-cut entity by itself) as opposed to the flowing and freely enjambed variety you try to unite flow lines and single line and farther undertake a form of blank verse quatrains! I have myself tried the blank verse quatrain; even, when I attempted the single-line blank verse on a large scale in *Savitri,* I found myself falling involuntarily into a series of four-line movement. But even though I was careful in the building, I found it led to a stiff monotony and had to make a principle of variation—one line, two line, three line, four line or longer passages (paragraphs as it were) alternating with each other; otherwise the system would be a failure.

"In attempting the blank verse quatrain one has to avoid like poison all flatness of movement—a flat movement immediately creates a sense of void and sets the ear asking for the absent rhyme. The last line of each verse especially must be a powerful line acting as a strong close so that the rhyming close-cadence is missed no more. And, secondly, there must be a very careful building of the structure. A mixture of sculpture and architecture is indicated—there should be plenty of clear-cut single lines but they must be built into a quatrain that is itself a perfect structural whole. In your lines it is these qualities that are lacking, so that the poetic substance fails in its effect owing to rhythmic insufficiency. One closing line of yours will absolutely not do—that of the fourth stanza—its feminine ending is enough to damn it; you may have feminine endings but not in the last line of the quatrain, and its whole movement is an unfinished movement. The others would do, but they lose half their force by being continuations of clauses which look back to the previous line for their sense. They can do that sometimes, but only on condition of their still having a clear-cut wholeness in themselves and coming in with a decisive force. In the structure, you have attempted to combine the flow of the lyrical quatrain with the force of a single line blank verse system. I suppose it can be done, but here the single line has interfered with the flow and the flow has interfered with the single line force.

"In my version—

Men dreamed of her strange hair; they saw it fall
A cataract of nectar through their sleep,
Crushing the soul with sweetness; they woke from dread,
With all their limbs a speechless heaven of pain!

Her voice soared to Creation's highest peak,
And that most delicate music with its rapture
Sweeping through seven worlds found out the gods
Helpless like flames swaying in a huge wind!

A beautiful terror were those dark conscious eddies,
Her pure vague-glimmering and fathomless eyes;
Therein the spirits that rashly plunged their love
Fell whirled through lifetimes of bewildering bliss!

But all in vain, her voice and gaze and hair
Before the snow-pale and immutable calm
Of Shiva's meditation, a frozen fire
Of lone omnipotence locked in self-light!

His far face glowed like an immortal death:
The inaudible disclosure of some white
Eternity, some unperturbed dream-vast,
It slew the colour and passion of time's heart-beat!—

I have made only minor changes for the most part, but many of them in order to secure what I feel to be the missing elements. I have indicated in the places where my reasons for change were of another kind what those reasons were;* the rest are dictated by the two considerations of rhythmic efficiency and quatrain structure. In the first verse this structure is secured by putting two pauses in the middle of lines, each clause taking up the sense from there and enlarging into amplitude and then bringing to a forceful close. In the second verse and in the fourth I have attempted a sweeping continuous quatrain movement but taken care to separate them by a different structure so as to avoid monotony. The third is made of two blank verse couplets, each complementary in sense to the other; the fifth is based on one-line monumental phrase worked out in sense by a three line development with a culminating close-line The whole thing is not perhaps as perfect as it needs to be, but it is in the nature of a demonstration, to show on what principles the blank verse quatrain can be built if it has to be done at all—I have founded it on the

* Line 3: " 'A-dread' seems to me rather feeble."
Line 5: " 'Reached' is very weak."
Line 17: "Why this inversion? It spoils the power and directness of the line."
Lines 18 & 19: "The double 'of' is very awkward and spoils both force and flow."

rule of full but well-sculptured single lines and an architectural quatrain structure: others are possible, but I think would be more difficult to execute.

"I had half a mind to illustrate my thesis by quotations from *Savitri*, but I resist the temptation, warned by the scowling forehead of Time—this will do.

"P.S.—I don't consider the proximity of the closing words 'light' and 'white' in the last stanzas an objection since the quatrains stand as separate entities—so I did not alter; of course in continuous blank verse an objection would be." (18-7-33)

(How is one to avoid intervals in the middle of writing a poem when the flow of inspiration ceases? If you yourself had ever to cope with the difficulty, how did you do it?)

"Inspiration is always a very uncertain thing; it comes when it chooses, stops suddenly before it has finished its work, refuses to descend when it is called. This is a well-known affliction, perhaps of all artists, but certainly of poets. There are some who can command it at will; those who, I think, are more full of an abundant poetic energy than careful for perfection; others who oblige it to come whenever they put pen to paper but with these the inspiration is either not of a high order or quite unequal in its levels. Again there are some who try to give it a habit of coming by always writing at the same time; Virgil with his nine lines first written, then perfected every morning, Milton with his fifty epic lines a day, are said to have succeeded in regularising their inspiration. It is, I suppose, the same principle which makes gurus in India prescribe for their disciples a meditation at the same fixed hour every day. It succeeds partially of course, for some entirely, but not for everybody. For myself, when the inspiration did not come with a rush or in a stream,—for then there is no difficulty,—I had only one way, to allow a certain kind of incubation in which a large form of the thing to be done threw itself on the mind and then wait for the white heat in which the entire transcription could rapidly take place. But I think each poet has his own way of working and finds his own issue out of inspiration's incertitudes."

(You write in your note to Harin about Toru Dutt and "Romesh of the same ilk" and Sarojini Naidu that you know of no other Indian than Sarojini to have published in English anything that is really alive and strong and original. I can understand your forgetting your own work, but how is it that you have omitted Harin himself? Surely he has published things that are bound to remain? Also, how was it that Oscar Wilde and Laurence Binyon could give praise to Manmohan Ghose? Has he done nothing that could touch Sarojini's level, though in another way?)

"I did not speak of Harin because that was a separate question altogether—besides, whether in criticising or in paying compliments, present company is always supposed to be excepted unless they are specially mentioned and for this purpose Harin and myself are present company. About Manmohan I said that I knew very little of his later work. As for his earlier work it had qualities which evoked the praise of Wilde. I do not know Binyon has written, but he is a fine poet and an admirable critic, not likely to praise work that has not quality. (Wilde and Binyon were both intimate friends of my brother,—at a time Manmohan was almost Wilde's disciple. If I were inclined to be Wildely malicious I might say that even Oscar's worst enemies never accused him of sincerity—of speech, so if he liked someone very much he would not scruple to overpraise his poetry but I think he considered my brother's poems to carry in them a fine promise. Binyon and Manmohan had almost the relations of Wordsworth and Southey in the first days, strongly admiring and stimulating each other.) Let me say then that my opinion was a personal one, perhaps born of brotherly intimacy—for if familiarity breeds contempt, fraternity may easily breed criticism—and based on insufficient data. I liked Manmohan's poetry well enough, but I never thought it to be great. He was a conscientious artist of word and rhyme almost painfully careful about technique. Virgil wrote nine lines every day and spent the whole morning rewriting and rerewriting them out of all recognition. Manmohan did better. He would write five or six half lines and quarter lines and spend the week filling them up. I remember the sacred wonder with which I regarded this process—something like this:

The morn....red......sleepless eyes
.... lilac .... rest.

Perhaps I exaggerate, but it was very much like that! That seemed to me to indicate an inspiration not very much on fire or in flood. But I suppose he became more fluent afterwards and I am ready to change my opinion if I have materials for doing so. I made no comparison with Sarojini. The two poets are poles asunder in their inspiration and manner. Sarojini has a true originality whatever its limits; even if she does not live for ever, she deserves to live. My brother was perhaps a finer artist, but has Manmohan's poetry similarly an unique and original power?"

(26-1-34)

(I said to Nirod and Jyoti that it has been a habit with me to reread and repeat and hum lines which I have felt or known to have come from very high sources. I mentioned your recent twelve poems as my aids to drawing inspiration from the Overhead planes. I quoted also the famous lines from other poets which have derived from the highest levels. Jyoti begged me to type for her all the lines of this character. From

your twelve poems I have chosen the following:

(1) *O marvel bird with the burning wings of light and the unbarred*
lids that look beyond all space...

(2) *Lost the titan winging of the thought...*

(3) *Arms taking to a voiceless supreme delight,*
Life that meets the Eternal with close breast,
An unwalled mind dissolved in the Infinite,
Force one with unimaginable rest.

(4) *My consciousness climbed like a topless hill...*

(5) *He who from Time's dull motion escapes and thrills*
Rapt, thoughtless, wordless into the Eternal's breast,
Unrolls the sign and form of being,
Seated above in the omniscient Silence.

(6) *Calm faces of the gods on backgrounds* vast
Bringing the marvel of the infinitudes...

(7) *A silent unnamed emptiness content*
Either to fade in the Unknowable
Or thrill with the luminous seas of the Infinite...

(8) *Crossing power-swept silences rapture-stunned,*
Climbing high far ethers eternal-sunned...

(9) *I have drunk the Infinite like a giant's wine...*

(10) *My soul unhorizoned widens to measureless sight...*

(11) *Rose of God like a blush of rapture on Eternity's face,*
Rose of love, ruby depth of all being, fire-passion of Grace!
Arise from the heart of the yearning that sobs in Nature's abyss:
Make earth the home of the Wonderful and life Beatitude's kiss.

I shan't ask you to tell me in detail the sources of all these lines—but what do you think in general of my choice? Only for one quotation I must crave the favour of your closer attention. Please do try to tell me something about it, for I like it so much that I cannot remain without knowing all that can be known: it is, of course, Number 3 here. I consider these lines the most satisfying I have ever read: poetically as well as spiritually, you have written others as great—but what I mean to say is that the whole essence of the truth of life is given by them and every cry in the being seems answered. So be kind enough to take a little trouble and give me an intimate knowledge about them. I'll be very happy to know their sources and the sort of *enthousiasmos* you had when writing them. How exactly did they come into being?)

"The choice is excellent. I am afraid I couldn't tell you in detail the sources, though I suppose they all belong to the Overhead inspiration. In all I simply remained silent and allowed the lines to come down shaped or shaping themselves on the way—I don't know that I know anything else about it. All depends on the stress of the *enthousiasmos*, the force of the creative thrill and largeness of the wave of its Ananda, but how

is that describable or definable? What is prominent in No. 3 is a certain calm, deep and intense spiritual emotion taken up by the spiritual vision that sees exactly the state or experience and gives it its exact revelatory words. It is an Overmind vision and experience and condition that is given a full power of expression by the word and the rhythm—there is a success in 'embodying' them or at least the sight and emotion of them which gives the lines their force." (4-5-37)

(You have nowhere said anything about Ferdausi, the epic poet of Persia, author of *Shahnameh*? Would you rank him with the other epic poets whom you consider absolutely first-rate—Homer, Valmiki, Vyasa? How is it that you who have made your own culture so wide by means of learning so many languages have allowed a serious gap in it by not knowing Persian?)

"I read Ferdausi in a translation long ago but it gave me no idea at all of the poetic qualities of the original. As for gaps in the culture—well, I don't know Russian or Finnish (missing the *Kalevala*) and haven't read the *Nibulungenlied* in the original, nor for that matter Pelaur's poem on the conquests of Rameses in ancient Egyptian or at least the fragment that survives. I don't know Arabic either, but I don't mind that, having read Burton's translation of the Arabian Nights which is as much a classic as the original. Anyhow, the gaps are vast and many." (13-7-37)

(Dr. Iyengar has given an interpretation to your poem *Thought the Paraclete,* which some other critic has fallen foul of. What is your own analysis of the thought-structure in this poem?)

"There is no thought-structure in the poem; there is only a succession of vision and experience, it is a mystic poem, its unity is spiritual and concrete, not a mental and logical building. When you see a flower, do you ask the gardener to reduce the flower to its chemical components? There would then be no flower left and no beauty. The poem is not built upon intellectual definitions or philosophical theorisings; it is something seen. When you ascend a mountain, you see the scenery and feel the delight of the ascent; you don't sit down to make a map with names for every rock and peak or spend time studying its geological structure—that is work for the geologist, not for the traveller. Iyengar's geological account (to make one is part of his *métier* as a critic and a student and writer on literature) is probably as good as any other is likely to be; but each is free to make his own according to his own idea. Reasoning and argumentation are not likely to make one account truer and invalidate the rest. A mystic poem may explain itself or a general idea may emerge from it, but it is the vision that is important or what one can get from it by intuitive feeling, not the explanation or idea; *Thought the Paraclete* is a vision or revelation of an ascent through spiritual planes, but gives

no names and no photographic descriptions of the planes crossed. I leave it there." (1944)

(It seems there was on P's part some sort of hesitation about publishing in the *Advent* my article on Art-Principles and that you gave some general directions apropos of it. May I have a copy of your remarks on P's letter?)

COPY

"There are three separate questions mixed together in this letter, (1) dealing with politics, (2) dealing with controversial questions, (3) the tone of the article with regard to X. The tone is that of lively and sometimes sharp controversy, but it is only an undue sensitiveness which could regard it as offensive. Nevertheless to avoid all objections I have erased or altered all references to X and his supporters except the two or three that are indispensable. In these there is nothing whatever that can be considered objectionable. As to politics, I presume that the prohibition referred to current politics. I cannot suppose that a dealing with political philosophy or with political ideas in general could come under the prohibition. It would not be, for instance, a violation of the rule if some passage from *The Ideal of Human Unity* were quoted in the *Advent*. Nor can we be debarred from differing with Marx's or Marxist ideas on history or philosophy or art or with the philosophy of Dialectical Materialism merely because it is sponsored by the Bolshevists. Amal's article is not about politics but about a question of art theory. The fact that one of the ideas combated is that art must have social or political or proletarian inspiration does not make it political. I have erased certain sentences which might be regarded as too mordant allusions to present-day politics. As for controversy, it was I myself who insisted on there being no writing whether in the *Advent* or other of our journals embodying political, social or economic controversy; but I did this for my own reasons and not from any timorous concession to any Government or to the sensibilities of political leaders. Discussion, even if controversial, on other subjects such as philosophy, art or similar matters has not been prohibited, though there need be no acrimonious debate.

"I do not understand why the *Advent* should limit itself to expressing my views about the world's future only or why it should ban my views about the world's past or present. It seems to me that both have been referred to occasionally in the pages of the *Advent* and that remarks about current topics, not political, do occur there. I may add that the mere fact of some one being an eminent political leader does not debar us or any one from differing with his views about philosophy, religion, art or other matters. Current Indian politics have to be avoided in our publications, that is all." (13-6-46)

(In that long letter on your own poetry, apropos my friend's criticisms, you have written of certain influences of the later Victorian period on you. Meredith's from *Modern Love* I have been unable to trace concretely—unless I consider some of the more pointed and bitter-sweetly reflective turns in *Songs to Myrtilla* to be Meredithian. That of Tennyson is noticeable in only a delicate picturesqueness here and there or else in the use of some words. Perhaps more than in your early blank verse the Tennysonian influence of this kind in general is there in *Songs to Myrtilla.* Arnold has influenced your blank verse in respect of particular constructions like two or three "buts" as in

No despicable wayfarer, but Ruru,
But son of a great Rishi,

or

But tranquil, but august, but making easy . . .

Arnold is also observable in the way you build up and elaborate your similes both in *Urvasie* and in *Love and Death.* Less openly, a general tone of poetic mind from him can also be felt: it persists subtly in even the poems collected in *Ahana,* not to mention *Baji Prabhou.* I don't know whether Swinburne is anywhere patent in your narratives: he probably does have something to do with *Songs to Myrtilla.* Stephen Phillips is the most direct influence in *Urvasie* and *Love and Death.* But as I have said in my essay on your blank verse he is assimilated into a stronger and more versatile genius, together with influences from the Elizabethans, Milton and perhaps less consciously Keats. In any case, whatever the influences, your early narratives are intensely original in essential spirit and movement and expressive body. It is only unreceptiveness or inattention that can fail to see this and to savour the excellence of your work.)

"The influences I spoke of were of course only such influences as every poet undergoes before he has entirely found himself. What you say about Arnold's influence is quite correct; it acted mainly, however, as a power making for restraint and refinement, subduing any uncontrolled romanticism and insisting on clear lucidity and right form and building. Meredith had no influence on *Songs to Myrtilla;* even afterwards I did not make myself acquainted with all his poetry, it was only *Modern Love* and poems like the sonnet on *Lucifer* and the *Ascent to Earth of the Daughter of Hades* that I strongly admired and it had its effect on the formation of my poetic style and its after-effects in that respect are not absent from *Savitri.* It is only Swinburne's early lyrical poems that exercised any power on me, *Dolores, Hertha, The Garden of Proserpine* and others that rank among his best work,—also *Atalanta in Calydon,* his later lyrical poetry I found too empty and his dramatic and narrative verse did not satisfy me. One critic characterised *Love and Death* as an extraordinarily brilliant and exact reproduction of Keats: what do you say to that? I think Stephen Phillips had more to do with it." (7-7-47)

(In your sonnet *Man the Enigma* occurs the magnificent line:

His heart a chaos and an empyrean.

But I am much saddened by the fact that the rhythm of these words gets spoiled at the end by a mis-stressing in "empyrean". "Empyrean" is stressed currently in the penultimate syllable, thus: "empyre/an". Your line puts the stress on the second syllable. It is in the adjective "empyreal" that the second syllable is stressed, but the noun is never stressed that way, so far as I know. Perhaps you have a precedent in the Elizabethans? Or have you deliberately taken liberty with the accentuation? The same mis-stressing occurs also in Book II, Canto 11, of *Savitri*: page 62, line 4 from below:

Surprised in their untracked empyrean.

But you certainly do not always stress the noun like the adjective. In Book I, Canto 3, line 15 from below on page 16 is the splendid verse:

An empyrean vision saw and knew.

Here the penultimate syllable gets the ictus. May I have some explanation? Perhaps there are acknowledged alternative accentuations and I am just ignorant? I really hope so, for otherwise, while the line from Book II of *Savitri* can easily take a noun after "empyrean" or get its "empyrean" changed to "empyreal" and then take a noun, the sonnet-line will not have the same absolute grandeur of phrase as now if it is rewritten:

His heart a chaos and an empyrean's span.

If it is to rhyme with "man", "plan" and "scan" in your sonnet-scheme it must bring in "span"—mustn't it?)

"I find in the Chamber's Dictionary the noun 'empyrean' is given two alternative pronunciations, each with a different stress,—the first, "empyre/an" and secondly, 'empy/rean'. Actually in the book the accent seems to fall on the consonant 'r' instead of the vowel. That must be a mistake in printing; it is evident that it is meant to fall on the second vowel. If that is so, my variation is justified and needs no further defence. The adjective 'empyreal' the dictionary gives as having the same alternative accentuation as the noun, that is to say, either 'empyre/al' with the accent on the long 'e' or 'empy/real' with the accent on the second syllable, but the 'e' although unaccented still keeps its long pronunciation. Then? But even if I had no justification from the dictionary and the noun 'empy/rean' were only an Aurobindonian freak and a wilful shifting of the accent, I would refuse to change it; for the rhythm here is an essential part of whatever beauty there is in the line.

P.S.—Your view is supported by the small Oxford Dictionary which, I suppose, gives the present usage, Chambers being an older authority. But Chambers must represent a former usage and I am entitled to revive even a past or archaic form if I choose to do so." (4-8-48)

LITERARY VALUES, INSPIRATIONS, FORMS, STYLES, TECHNIQUES

(May I have some general rule about writing prose—besides the emphasis you have always laid on rhythm?)

"Avoid over-writing; let all your sentences be the vehicle of something worth saying and say it with a vivid precision neither defective nor excessive. Don't let either thought or speech trail or drag or circumvolute. Don't let the language be more abundant than the sense. Don't indulge in mere clever ingenuities without a living truth behind them."

(14-6-35)

(How would you look at too violent condensations in literature?)

"Too violent condensations of language or too compressed thoughts always create a sense either of obscurity or, if not that, then of effort and artifice, even if a powerful and inspired artifice. Yet very great poets and writers have used them, so great a poet as Aeschylus or so great a prose stylist as Tacitus. Then there are the famous 'knots' in the Mahabharata. I think one can say that these condensations are justified when they say something with more power and depth and full, if sometimes recondite, significance than an easier speech would give, but to make it a constant element of the language (without a constant justification of that kind) would turn it into a mannerism or artifice."

(The English reader has digested Carlyle and swallowed Meredith and is not quite unwilling to reJOYCE in even more startling strangenesses of expression at the present day. Will his stomach really turn at the novelty of that phrase which you wouldn't approve: "the voice of a devouring eye"? "The voice of an eye" sounds rather idiotic, but if the adjective "devouring" is added the phrase seems to become effective. "Devouring eye" is then a synecdoche—isolating and emphasising Shakespeare's most remarkable quality, his eager multitudinous sight, and the oral epithet provides a connection with the idea of a voice, thus preventing the catachresis from being too startling. If Milton could give us "blind mouths" and Wordsworth

Thou eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, readst the eternal deep,

is there very much to object to in this visioned voice?)

"Can't accept all that. A voice of a devouring eye is even more re-Joycingly mad than a voice of an eye pure and simple. If the English language is to go to the dogs, let it go, but the Joyce cut by the way of Bedlam does not recommend itself to me.

"The poetical examples have nothing to do with the matter. Poetry is permitted to be insane—the poet and the madman go together: though even there there are limits. Meredith and Carlyle are tortuous or extravagant in their style only—though they can be perfectly sane when they want. In poetry anything can pass—for instance, my 'voice of a tilted nose':

O voice of a tilted nose,
Speak but speak not in prose!
Nose like a blushing rose,
O Joyce of a tilted nose!

That is high poetry, but put it in prose and it sounds insane." (5-5-35)

(I am afraid that poem of mine is quite a hash, what with those expressions that you find difficult to stomach).

"'Young heart', 'thrilled companionship', 'warm hour', 'lip to lip', 'passionate unease' are here poorly sensuous *clichés*—they or any one or two of them might have been carried off in a more moved and inspired style, gathering colour from their surroundings or even a new and rich life; but here they stand out in a fashionable dressed-up insufficiency. This secret of fusing all in such a white heat or colour heat of sincerity of inspiration that even the common or often-used phrases and ideas catch fire and burn brilliantly with the rest is one of the secrets of the true poetic afflatus. But if you stop short of that inspiration and begin to write efficient poetry, then you must be careful of your P's and Q's." (19-3-32)

(Yes, the line "... so grief-hearted, strangely lone" is pretty poor. How would you exactly hit off the "quality" of its failure?)

"The line strikes at once the romantically sentimental note of more than a hundred years ago which is dead and laughed out of court nowadays. Especially in writing anything about vital love, avoid like the plague anything that descends into the sentimental or, worse, the namby-pamby." (30-5-32)

(Here is a poem which seems to me an expression of the lower vital (to use our yogic classification) lashed to imaginative fury. Any real possibilities along this line?)

"An expression of the lower vital lashed to imaginative fury is likely to produce not poetry but simply 'sound and fury', — 'tearing a passion to tatters' and in its full furiousness may even rise to rant and fustian.

Erotic poetry more than any other needs the restraint of beauty and form and measure, otherwise it risks being no longer poetic but merely pathologic."

(14-6-32)

(In the poem I have submitted, the phrase "carnal prize" was indeed ugly and it must be thrown overboard. I suppose what the inspiration really meant in this poem is, as you put it, that I am not turning coldly to a cold Emptiness but with the same undiminished fire of longing to a greater imperishable Beauty than the earthly which my senses knew. But there was an additional nuance that arose in my mind in response to the inspiration—namely, that the joy and beauty found in "mutable" things was due to the magnificent revealing flame of youth and desire. Without that flame, even earth's beauty and the beauty of the body would have proved drear and comfortless. And it was because I had the same zest and emotive ardour when turning towards the Infinite as when turning towards things carnal that what I sought for could never be for me barren and cold and that I got, instead, a revelation of "undying rapturous Loveliness." It is this idea in particular that seems to have suggested the title I proposed: *The Sovereign Secret*—the secret being that to find in spiritual life something more pleasurable than even in that of the senses, one must turn towards the Unknown with a heart of intense love and not with "sage calm.")

"If I am to take some expressions in your letter at their face-value you seem to put forward—at least as poet—three notions about spiritual seeking which are somewhat extraordinary.

1. It is the *same* love which is addressed towards a 'carnal prize' and towards the Divine. I should imagine that one who approached the Divine with a 'carnal' or an untransformed vital love would embrace something of the vital world but certainly get nowhere near the Divine.

2. The Divine in itself is something cold and empty and dark—only human love gives it some warmth and attraction. I always thought that the Divine was the supreme ineffable Ananda of which human love and delight is only a clouded and fallen ray—most often hardly even that—compared with the empyrean of ethereal fire. How can the luminous eternal Ananda be something cold and dark, I should like to know.

3. Or perhaps you only mean that the Divine Infinite which the calm sages seek is by the very fact of their calm and wisdom something cold, dark, empty, gloomy. Has it not occurred to you that if they really sought for something cold, dark and gloomy as the supreme good, they would not be sages but asses? The sages sought after the Divine as the supreme Existence, Consciousness and Bliss, the Light beyond lights, by which all this shineth, the Joy beyond all other joys. Even the seekers of the Absolute Indefinable find in it the peace that passeth all understanding and

that is nothing cold, dark or gloomy. The Nihilistic Buddhists? But they did not believe in the Divine or in Eternity, only in Non-existence and what they sought was not the supreme good, but self-extinction and the end of suffering—an intelligible aim, but something quite different from the stress towards the Eternal." (15-7-31)

(Some time back I was wondering whether a second such outburst of quintessential romantic poetry as Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* was not possible. I wrote the first draft of some lines, but I am afraid they come nowhere near that gem.)

"I do not know why this fancy has seized on you to follow in the trace of others. No good work is likely to come out of such a second-hand motive. Let me add that this poem of Coleridge is a masterpiece, not because it is the quintessence of romantic poetry, but because it is a genuine supraphysical experience caught and rendered in a rare hour of exaltation with an absolute accuracy of vision and authenticity of rhythm. Further, romantic poetry could be genuine in the early nineteenth century, but the attempt to walk back into it in the year 1931 is not likely to be a success, it can only result in an artificial literary exercise. You have a genuine vein of poetic inspiration somewhere above your intellect which comes through sometimes when the said intellect can be induced to be quiet and the lower vital does not meddle. If I were you, I should try to find that always and make the access to it free and the transcriptions from it pure (for then your writing becomes marvellously good); that would be a truer line of progress than these exercises." (21-8-31)

(In Shelley's *Skylark* my heart does not easily melt towards one simile —

Like a high-born maiden
In a palace-tower,
Soothing her love-laden
Soul in secret hour
With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower.

Sometimes I am inclined even to feel this is an atrocity. Then I wonder whether the sentimental stuff shouldn't be cut out and replaced by something deeper although in Shelley's style as much as possible—something like:

Like a child who wanders
In an ancient wood
Where the strange glow squanders
All its secret mood
Upon her lilting soul lost in that solitude.)

"The attempt to rewrite Shelley better than Shelley himself is a rash and hopeless endeavour. Your proposed stanza is twentieth century mysticism

quite out of place in the *Skylark* and has not the simple felicity and magic and music of Shelley's verse. I fail to see why the high-born maiden is an atrocity—it expresses the romantic attitude towards love which was sentimental and emotional, attempting to lift it out of the coarseness of life into a mental-vital idealism which was an attempt to resuscitate the attitude of chivalry and the troubadours. Romantic and unreal, if you like, but not atrocious." (8-11-34)

(It was Keats's ambition to write "a few fine plays" and some critics believe that he had the capacity to fulfil it. What is your impression? Do you think any of the Romantic poets had it?)

"I don't believe Keats had any dramatic genius in him. None of these poets had. Shelley's *Cenci* is a remarkable feat of dramatic construction and poetic imagination but it has no organic life like the work of the Elizabethans or the Greeks or like such dramas as the *Cid* or Racine's tragedies." (7-2-35)

(The Arnoldian terms "noble," "elevation," "grandeur" — are they really ruled out for Chapman's translation of Homer or for the ballad metre at its best?)

"'Noble' has a special meaning, also 'elevation' is used in a certain sense by Arnold. In that sense these words do not seem to me to be applicable either to Chapman or to the ballad metre. Strong, forceful, energetic, impressive they may be—but nobility is a rarer, calmer, more self-mastered, highly harmonious thing than these are. Also, nobility and grandeur are not quite the same thing." (2-2-35)

(In that early poem of Harin's which you appreciated, there is no indication that the God spoken of is not the sole Divinity. There is no distinction hinted that the true and essential Godhead is not referred to but only a construction out of universal appearances. For the time being, there is no God but a jealous God—all Godhead is seen as a lonely jealousy directed against human love and happiness. Isn't a human relation idealised here with a ludicrous thought-effect which is a flaw in the poem?)

"If Harin had indicated that the God spoken of was not the sole Divinity he would have spoiled the poem. For the purposes of the poem he has to be spoken of as the sole Divinity. Why must we take the poem as an exercise in philosophy? A poem is a poem, not a doctrine. It expresses something in the poet's mind or his feeling. If it agrees with the total truth or the highest truth of the universe, so much the better, but we cannot demand that of every poet and every poem. My appreciation was given from the purely aesthetic standpoint. Even if a poet were to extol a false doctrine such as a malevolent God creating a painful universe,

still if it were a fine poem I would enjoy and praise it—although it would be there too an appearance of the universe but not spoiled by putting it forward as a doctrine." (1-2-35)

(Does the theory I have expounded and illustrated in that article on the poetic "daimon" hold water? As part of literature it may be perfectly legitimate, but is there any chance of its being true?)

"What is exactly your theory? There is one thing—influences — everybody undergoes influences, absorbs them or rejects, makes them disappear in one's own developed style or else keeps them as constituent strands. There is another thing — Lines of Force. In the universe there are many lines of Force on which various personalities or various achievements and formations spring up—e.g. the line Pericles-Caesar-Napoleon or the line Alexander-Jenghis-Tamerlane-Napoleon—meeting together there—so it may be too in poetry, lines of poetic force prolonging themselves from one poet to another, meeting and diverging. Yours seems to be a third—a Daimon or individual Spirit of Poetry migrating from one individual to another, several perhaps meeting together in one poet who gives them all a full expression. Is that it? If so, it is an interesting idea and arguable." (17-2-35)

(What precisely is meant when we say that poems exist already on higher planes and have only to be transmitted here by the human consciousness? If the parts of a poem hail from quite different planes, where exactly does the whole exist? Are there poetic fragments floating about, which cohere only in the mind of the man who catches them? And have these fragments a form already of language or do they become expressed by us alone? Are all the innumerable languages of earth spoken in the higher planes or do the latter possess merely modes or states of consciousness?)

"A poem may preexist in the timeless as all creation preexists there or else in some plane where the past, present and future exist together. But it is not necessary to presuppose anything of the kind to explain the phenomena of inspiration. All is here a matter of formation or creation. By the contact with the source of inspiration the creative Power at one level or another and the human instrument, receptacle or channel get into contact. That is the essential point, all the rest depends upon the individual case. If the substance, rhythm, form, words come down all together ready-formed from the plane of poetic creation, that is the perfect type of inspiration; it may give its own spontaneous gift or it may give something which corresponds to the idea or the aspiration of the poet, but in either case the human being is only a channel or receptacle, although he feels the joy of the creation and the joy of the *avesh, enthousiasmos,* elation of the inrush and the passage. On the other hand it may be that the creative source sends down the substance or stuff, the force and the idea, but the language,

rhythm etc. are found somewhere in the instrument; he has to find the human transcription of something that is there in diviner essence above; then there is an illumination or excitement, a conscious labour of creation swift or slow, hampered or facile. Something of the language may be supplied by the mind or vital, something may break through from somewhere behind the veil, from whatever source gets into touch with the transcribing mind in the liberating or stimulating excitement or uplifting of the consciousness. Or a line or lines may come through from some plane and the poet excited to creation may build around them constructing his material or getting it from any source he can tap. There are many possibilities of this nature. There is also the possibility of an inspiration not from above, but from somewhere within on the ordinary levels, some inner mind, emotional, vital etc. which the mind practised in poetical technique works out according to its habitual faculty. Here again in a different way similar phenomena, similar variations may arise.

"As for the language, the tongue in which the poem comes or the whole lines from above, that offers no real difficulty. It all depends on the contact between the creative Power and the instrument or channel, the Power will naturally choose the language of the instrument or channel, that to which it is accustomed and can therefore readily hear and receive. The Power itself is not limited and can use any language, but although it is possible for things to come through in a language unknown or ill-known—I have seen several instances of the former—it is not a usual case, since the *sanskaras* of the mind, its habits of action and conception would normally obstruct any such unprepared receptiveness; only a strong mediumistic faculty might be unaffected by this difficulty. These things, however, are obviously exceptional, abnormal or supernormal phenomena.

"If the parts of a poem come from different planes, it is because one starts from some high plane but the connecting consciousness cannot receive uninterruptedly from there and as soon as it flickers or wavers it comes down to a lower, perhaps without noticing it, or the lower comes in to supply the continuation of the flow or on the contrary the consciousness starts from a lower plane and is lifted in the *avesh* perhaps occasionally, perhaps more continuously higher for a time or else the higher force attracted by the creative will breaks through or touches or catches up the less excited inspiration towards or into itself. I am speaking here especially of the Overhead planes where this is quite natural; for the Overmind, for instance, is the ultimate source of intuition, illumination or heightened power of the planes immediately below it. It can lift them up into its own greater intensity or give out of its intensity to them or touch or combine their powers together with something of its own greater power—or they can receive or draw something from it or from each other. On the lower planes beginning from the mental downwards there can also be such variations, but the working is not the same, for the different powers here stand more

on a footing of equality whether they stand apart from each other, each working in its own right or cooperate." (29-4-37)

(The other day, in the course of a talk with Pavitra, I happened to mention Hugo's *Les Misérables* as a great book. "Faugh!" he said, "what a shallow thing!" As we were speaking of the masterpieces of art, I concluded that he was definitely against including this book in that category. I have the impression that you used to regard it as one of the world's great novels. Am I mistaken?)

"It is not one of the masterpieces of 'art', but I regard it as the work of a powerful genius and certainly one of the great novels. It is certainly not philosophically or psychologically deep, but it is exceedingly vivid and powerful." (25-4-37)

(With regard to *Les Misérables* I did not mean art in quotation marks but in the general sense. Shakespeare has his "artistic" defects, nor is he philosophically or psychologically deep, but all that doesn't prevent his plays from being considered masterpieces of literature. What I want to know is whether *Les Misérables* could be counted among the world's great novel-creations and whether that "Faugh!", on the ground of the book's being not psychologically or philosophically deep, is a legitimate criticism).

"'People have different tastes—some regard Hugo as a childish writer, a rhetorician without depth—others regard him as a great poet and novelist. One has to give one's own judgment and leave others to hold theirs."

(26-4-37)

(Well, I am not going to bludgeon Pavitra with your pronouncement that *Les Misérables* is one of the world's great novels, an exceedingly vivid and powerful creation. But the point raised by his own view is worth discussing. In criticising novels, should one depreciate a work because its ideas are not very deep? Is *Vanity Fair* deep? Is *David Copperfield* deep? Is *Cousine Bette* or *Pére Goriot* deep? And what about *Tom Jones?* The question I am putting you is a general one and meant to help my own judgment and not to prolong any controversy).

"That is again a matter of opinion. There is the position that plot and character-presentation are sufficient and for the rest a large or great theme —one of the well-recognised human situations or a picture of life largely dealt with—and no more is necessary. Most famous English novels of the past are like that. There is another position that subtle psychology, deep and true presentation (not merely imaginative or idealistic) of the profounder problems or secrets of life and nature are needed. Hugo's characters and situations are thought by many to be melodramatic or superficial and untrue. His novels, like his dramas, are 'romantic' and the present

trend is against the romantic treatment of life as superficial, childishly overcoloured and false. The disparagement of what was formerly considered great is common on that ground. 'Faugh!' expresses the feeling."

(27-4-37)

LITERARY VALUES AND SOME MODERN TRENDS

(You have not commented yet on the two poems I sent up—rather "modern" in their irregularity. I doubt if they possess real value. What's your opinion?)

"My opinion is that these two poems reproduce very successfully the fault of most 'modern' (contemporary) poetry, at least what I have seen of it; I admit I have not read much of this poetry, but the little I have is all of the same fundamental quality. It is all very carefully written and versified, *recherché* in thought and expression; it lacks only two things—the inspired phrase and inevitable word and the rhythm that keeps a poem for ever alive. These two poems also are well-written, well-thought; all the material of good poetry is there but not the poetry itself, except the four lines I have marked off, and even these are a little tame in rhythm, though perfect in poetic speech and verbal inspiration. Speech carefully studied and made as perfect as it can be without reaching to inspiration, verse as good as verse can be without rising to inspired rhythm—there are something like a hundred 'great' poets (if you can believe their admirers) writing like that in England just now. It will be easy for you to be the hundred and first, if you like, but I would not advise you to proceed farther on that kind of modern line. It is not the irregular verse or rhymes that matter, one can make perfection out of irregularity—it is that they write from the cultured mind, not from the elemental soul-power within. Not a principle to accept or a method to imitate!" (?-6-31)

(Have you seen the poem, *Limber Horses,* in the copy of *The New Statesman and the Nation* recently sent up to you? What sort of inspiration has it?)

"It is evidently inspired from the vital world—from a certain part of it which seems to be breaking out in much of today's literature and art. All that comes from this source is full of a strange kind of force, but out of focus, misshaped in thought or vision or feeling, sometimes in the form too, ominous and perverse. For that matter, the adverse vital world is very much with us now,—the War was the sign of its descent on the earth and After-war bears its impress. But from another point of view that is not a cause for alarm or discouragement—for it has always been predicted

from occult sources that such a descent would be the precursor of the Divine Manifestation."

(What do you think of Georgian poetry in general?)

"The defect of what was called Georgian poetry—though I suppose it would more properly be called late-Victorian-Edwardian-early Georgian—is that it has fullness of language which fails to go home—things that ought to be very fine, but miss being so; so much of the poetry of Rupert Brooke as I have seen, for instance, always gives me that impression. In our own language I might say that it is an inspiration which tries to come from the Higher Mind but only succeeds in inflating the voice of the poetic intelligence."

(1-11-36)

(Donne is very much in the limelight these days. How far can we regard the present high estimate of him as justified? Does he not in his ingenuities combine most interestingly the life-force of the Elizabethans with a new intellectual temper?)

"It seems to me that Donne falls between two stools. The Elizabethan ingenuities pass because of the great verve of the life force that makes them attractive; Donne's ingenuities remain intellectual and do not get alive except at times, the vital fire or force is not there to justify them and make them alive and lively. On the other hand he keeps to an Elizabethan or semi-Elizabethan style, but the Elizabethan energy is no longer there—he does not launch himself as Milton did into a new style suitable for the predominant play of the poetic intelligence. Energy and force of a kind he has, but it is twisted, laboured, something that has not found itself. That is why he is not so great a poet as he might have been. He is admired today because the modern mind has become like his—it too is straining for energy and force without having the life-impulse necessary for a true vividness and verve nor that higher vision which would supply another kind of energy—its intellect too is twisted, laboured, not in possession of itself."

(28-2-35)

(I am sending you a sonnet by Edward Shanks, considered to be "one of our best younger poets":

O Dearest, if the touch of common things
Can taint our love or wither, let it die.
The freest-hearted lark that soars and sings
Soon after dawn amid a dew-brushed sky
Takes song from love and knows well where love lies.
Hid in the grass, the dear domestic nest,
The secret, splendid, common paradise.
The strangest joys are not the loveliest.

Passion far-sought is dead when it is found
But love that's born of intimate common things
Cries with a voice of splendour, with a sound
That over stranger feeling shakes and rings.
The best of love, the highest ecstasy
Lies in the intimate touch of you and me.)

"Shanks—Phoebus, what a name!! I am not in love with the sonnet, though it is smoothly and musically rhythmed. The sentiment is rather namby-pamby, some of the lines weak, others too emphatic, e.g. the twelfth. It just missess being a really good poem, or is so, like the curate's egg, in parts: e.g. the two opening lines of the third verse are excellent, but they are immediately spoiled by two lines that shout and rattle. So too the last couplet promises well in its first line, but the last disappoints, it is too obvious a turn and there is no fusion of the idea with the emotion that ought to be there and isn't. Still, the writer is evidently a poet and the sonnet very imperfect but by no means negligible." (12-6-31)

(I should like to have a few words from you on the poetic style and technique of these two quotations. The first is an instance of Gerard Manley Hopkins' polyphony "at its most magnificent and intricate":

Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, | vaulty, voluminous... stupendous
Evening strains to be time's vast, | womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.
Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, | her wild hollow hoarlight hung to the height
Waste: her earliest stars, earl-stars, | stars principal, overbend us,
Fire-featuring heaven. For earth her being has unbound, her dapple is at as end as-
tray or aswarm, all through her in throngs; | self in self steeped and pashed—quite
Disremembering, dismembering | all now. Heart, you round me right
With: Our evening is over us; our night whelms, whelms, and will end us...

The next quotation illustrates Kipling's Tommy-Atkins-music at its most vivid and onomatopoeic—lines considered by Lascelles Abercrombie to be a masterly fusion of all the elements necessary in poetic technique:

'Less you want your toes trod off you'd better get back at once,
For the bullocks are walking two by two,
The "byles" are walking two by two,
The bullocks are walking two by two,
An' the elephants bring the guns!
Ho! Yuss!
Great—big—long—black forty-pounder guns:
Jiggery-jolty to and fro,
Each as big as a launch in tow—
Blind—dumb—broad-breached beggars o' battering guns!)

"My verdict on Kipling's lines would be that they are fit for the columns of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and nowhere else. I refuse to accept this journalistic jingle as poetry. As for Abercrombie's comment,—unspeakable rubbish, unhappily spoken!

"Hopkins is a different proposition; he is a poet which Kipling never was nor could be. He has vision, power, originality; but his technique errs by excess; he piles on you his effects, repeats, exaggerates and in the end it is perhaps great in effort, but not great in success. Much material is there, many new suggestions, but not a work realised, not a harmoniously perfect whole."

(30-12-32)

(In Arjava's poem *New-Risen Moon's Eclipse,*

Harsh like the shorn head high of a gaunt grey-hooded friar
Who fears the beauty and use of sculptured limbs
(Branding the sculptor-archetype a liar),
O moon but lately risen from the foam where the sea-mew skims—
Form that a wan light cassocks, grace that a tonsure dims.

Joy that the leaden curse is rolled away to leave the golden
Tresses of earth-transforming gramarye
Whereby our wildered flesh-fret is enfolden—
O fair as the foam-fashioned goddess that awoke from the wondering sea,
Love with the earth-shroud lifted, star from the shade set free!—

would you consider the general verbal impression of the line "Whereby our wildered flesh-fret is enfolden" to be Hopkinsian? Or take the sextuple alliteration—flesh-fret, enfolden, fair, foam-fashioned—which only Hopkins and Swinburne were capable of. And would you say that a compound like "flesh-fret" seems to be just in line with the Hopkinsian "bugle-blue", "silver-surfèd", "cuckoo-call", "fast-flying" and (though this is strictly speaking a super-compound) "dapple-dawn-drawn"? Perhaps the very sound of "flesh-fret" would strike one as Hopkinsian? I mean the peculiar rhythm it makes, apart even from the significative element of the style of it.)

"Surely, one cannot be accused of being Hopkinsian, merely because of a successfully copious alliteration and an alliterative compound? These things have happened before Hopkins and will go on happening after him even if he is no longer read. It may be that these turns came to Arjava because of the influence of Hopkins—to that only he can plead Yes or No. What I say is that the way he uses them is *not* Hopkinsian, not Swinburnian, but Arjavan. 'Flesh-fret' has not the least resemblance to 'bugle-blue' or 'cuckoo-call' or 'fast-flying', still less to "dapple-dawn-drawn' except the mere external fact of the alliterative structure; its spiritual quality is quite different. To take an idea or a formation or anything else from a former poet—as Molière took his '*bon*' wherever he found it,—is common to every

maker of verse; we don't write on a blank slate virgin of the past. Indian sculpture or architecture may have taken this form from the Greeks or that form from the Persians; but neither is in the least degree Achaemenian or Hellenistic." (1-4-32)

To Arjava about the same poem: "The poem is a very good one. The one thing that can be said against it is that you need to go through it twice or thrice before the full beauty of the thought, rhythm and imagery comes to the surface—but is that a demerit? Poems that are too easily read, as a French critic puts it, are not always the best. I myself doubted a little at first reading about the rhythm of the three first lines of the second verse, but that was because I was listening with the outer ear, my attention having been dulled by much dealing with miscellaneous correspondence before I turned to the poem; but as soon as it got inside to the inner ear, I felt the subtlety and rareness of the movement. There is a great beauty and significant force in the imagery and a remarkably successful fusion of the supporting object (physical symbol) into the revealing or transmuting image and the image into the object, which is part of the highest art of symbolic or mystic poetry. 'Heard before'? If you refer to elements of the rhythm, words or phrases here and there, or images used before though not in the same way, where is the poetry in so old and rich a literature as the English that altogether escapes this suspicion of 'heard before'? Absolute originality in that sense is rare, almost non-existent; we are all those who went before us with something new added that is ourselves, and it is this something added that transfigures and is the real originality. In this sense there is a great impression of original power in the beauty of the first verse and hardly less in the second. It seems to me very successful, and 'triviality' is the description that can be least applied to it while it could lack interest only to those who have no mind for poetry of this character."

(Robert Bridges has invented what is called the loose Alexandrine. Lascelles Abercombie explains its principle thus: "The novelty is to make the number of syllables the fixt base of the metre; but these are the effective syllables, those which pronunciation easily slurs or combines with following syllables being treated as metrically ineffective. The line consists of 12 metrically effective syllables; and within this constant scheme the metre allows of any variation in the number and placing of the accents. Thus the rhythm attained is purely accentual, in accordance with the genius of the English language, but a new freedom is achieved within the confines of a new kind of discipline." What do you think of the principle?)

"I do not understand how this can be called an accentual rhythm except in the sense that all English rhythm, prose or verse, is accentual. What one usually means by accentual verse is verse with a fixed number of accents for each line, but here accents can be of any number and placed anywhere as it would be in a prose cut up into lines. The only distinctive

feature is thus of the number of 'effective' syllables. The result is a kind of free verse movement with a certain irregular regularity in the lengths of the lines."

(?-?-36)

(I am sending you two poems—one is Albert Samain's famous *Pannyre aux talons d'or* and the other is Flecker's much-praised translation of it. I shall be very much interested in your comparison of the two. Here is Samain:

Dans la salle en rumeur un silence a passé..
Pannyre aux talons d'or s'avance pour danser.
Un voile aux mille plis la cache tout entière.
D'un long trille d'argent la flûte, la première,
L'invite; elle s'élance, entre-croise ses pas,
Et du lent mouvement imprimé par ses bras,
Donne un rhythme bizarre á l'étoffe nombreuse,
Qui s'elargit, ondule, et se gonfle et se creuse,
Et se déploie enfin en large tourbillon...
Et Pannyre devient fleur, flamme, papillon!
Tous se taisent; les yeux la suivant en extase.
Peu à peu la fureur de la danse l'embrase.
Elle tourne toujors; vite! plus vite encor!
La flamme éperdument vacille aux flambeaux d'or!..
Puis, brusque, elle s'arrète au milieu de la salle;
Et la voile qui tourne autour d'elle en spirale,
Suspendu dans sa course, apaise ses long plis,
Et, se collant aux seins aigus, aux flancs polis,
Comme au travers d'une eau soyeuse et continue,
Dans un divin eclair, montre Pannyre nue.

Here is Flecker:

The revel pauses, and the room is still.
The silver flute invites her with a trill,
And buried in her great veils, fold on fold,
Rises to dance Pannyra, Heel of Gold.
Her light steps cross, her subtle arm impels
The clinging drapery, it shrinks and swells,
Hollows and floats, and bursts into a whirl;
She is a flower, a moth, a flaming girl.
All lips are silent; eyes are all in trance,
She slowly wakes the madness of the dance;
Windy and wild the golden torches burn;
She turns, and swifter yet she tries to turn,
Then stops; a sudden marble stiff she stands,
The veil that round her coiled its spiral bands,
Checked in its course, brings all its folds to rest,

And clinging to bright limb and pointed breast
Shows, as beneath silk waters woven fine,
Pannyra naked in a flash divine!

("All here", says a critic, "is bright and sparkling as the jewels on the dancer's breast, but there is one ill-adjusted word—*pointed* breast—which is perhaps more physiological than poetic." Personally I don't somehow react very happily to the word "girl" in line 8.)

"Samain's poem is a fine piece of work, inspired and perfect; Flecker's is good only in substance, an adequate picture, one may say, but the expression and verse are admirable within their limits. The difference is that the French has vision and the inspired movement that comes with vision—all on the vital plane, of course,—but the English version has only physical sight, sometimes with a little glow in it, and the precision that comes with that sight. I don't know why your critical sense objects to 'girl'. This line,

She is a flower, a moth, a flaming girl,

and one other,

Windy and wild the golden torches burn,

are the only two that rise above the plane of physical sight. But both these poems have the distinction of being perfectly satisfying in their own kind.

P.S. 'Flaming girl' and 'pointed breast' might be wrong in spirit as a translation of the French—but that is just what Flecker's poem is not, in spite of its apparent or outward fidelity, it is in spirit quite a different poem."

(23-6-32)

(Lowes Dickinson obtained mystical experiences from music. He once told me that Beethoven's later quartettes and other chamber music seemed really to introduce one into some other world. Was he under a delusion?)

"There can be no doubt that Beethoven's music was often from another world; so it is quite possible for it to give the key to an inwardly sensitive hearer or to one who is seeking or ready for the connection to be made. But I think it is very few who get beyond being aesthetically moved by a sense of greater things; to lay the hand on the key and use it is rare."

(What would you say on the contrast between Lowes Dickinson's *Modern Symposium* (1905)—especially the fine passage on page 75—and his post-war Dialogue, *On the Discovery of Good?)*

"The pre-war and the post-war Dickinson are indeed a contrast. This appreciation of human life is not without the force of a half-truth, but it is just the other half that he misses when he sweeps idealism out of the field. Man's utopias may be the projection of his hopes and desires, but he has to go on building them on pain of death, decline or collapse. As for the gospel of pleasure, it has been tried before and always failed—Life and Nature

after a time weary of it and reject it, as if after a surfeit of cheap sweets. Man has to rush from his pursuit of pleasure, with all its accompaniment of petrifying shallowness, cynicism, hardness, frayed nerves, *ennui*, dissatisfaction and fatigue, to a new idealism or else sink towards a dull or catastrophic decadence. Even if the Absolute Good were a high spiritual or ideal chimera, the pursuit of it is rooted in the very make of humanity and it is one of the main sources of the perennial life of the race. And that it is so would seem to indicate that it is not a chimera—something still beyond man, no doubt, but into which or towards which he is called by Nature to grow."

LITERARY VALUES AND SOME INSPIRATIONAL QUALITIES

(I feel *The Triumph of Dante* has now been sufficiently quintessenced. If it satisfies you, will you make whatever analysis is possible of its inspirational qualities?

These arms, stretched through ten hollow years, have brought her
Back to my heart! A light, a hush immense
Falls suddenly upon my voice of tears,
Out of a sky whose each blue moment bears
The shining touch of that omnipotence.
Ineffable the secrecies supreme
Pass and elude my gaze—an exquisite
Failure to hold some nectarous Infinite!
The uncertainties of time grow shadowless—
And never but with startling loveliness,
A white shiver of breeze on moonlit water,
Flies the chill thought of death across my dream.

For, how shall earth be dark when human eyes
Mirror the love whose smile is paradise?—
A love that misers not its golden store
But gives itself and yearns to give yet more,
As though God's light were inexhaustible
Not for His joy but this one heart to fill!)

"There are three different tones or pitches of inspiration in the poem, each in its own manner reaching inevitability. The first seven lines up to 'gaze' bear as a whole the stamp of a high elevation of thought and vision—height and illumination lifted up still farther by the Intuition to its own inspired level; one passage (lines 3, 4) seems to me almost to touch in its tone of expression an Overmind seeing. But here 'A light, a hush ... a voice of tears' anticipates the second movement by an element of subtle inner intensity in it. This inner intensity—where a deep secret intimacy of feeling and seeing replaces the height and large luminosity—characterises the rest of the first part. This passage has a seizing originality and authenticity in it—it is here that one gets a pure inevitability. In the last lines the intuition descends towards the mental plane with a less revelatory power in it but more precise in its illumination. That is the difference between sheer vision and thought. But the poem

is exceedingly fine as a whole; the close also is of the first order."

(14-9-36)

(I am drawn to Dante especially by his conception of Beatrice which seems to me to give him his excellence. How would you define that conception?)

"Outwardly it was an idealisation, probably due to a psychic connection of the past which could not fulfil itself in that life. But I do not see how his conception of Beatrice gives him his excellence—it was only one element in a very powerful and complex nature." (10-7-32)

(Would you call Dante a mystic poet? What is usually his plane of inspiration? And what about Milton? Both the poets have a metaphysical background and a strong religious fervour.)

"I don't think either can be called a mystic poet—Milton not at all. A religious fervour or a metaphysical background belongs to the mind and vital, not to a mystic consciousness. Dante writes from the poetic intelligence with a strong intuitive drive behind it." (18-10-36)

(You have distinguished five kinds of poetic style—the adequate, the effective, the illumined, the inspired, the inevitable. The first four can have their own inevitableness, but the fifth is a pure inevitability, something indefinable. How would you class Dante's style? It has a certain simplicity mixed with power which suggests what I may call the forceful adequate—of course at an inevitable pitch—as its definition. Or is it a mixture of the adequate and the effective? A line like—"E venni dal martirio a questa pace"*—is evidently adequate; but has this the same style—

Si come quando Marsia traesti
Della vagina delle membre sue?†)

"The 'forceful adequate' might apply to much of Dante's writing, but much else is pure inevitable; elsewhere it is the inspired style as in the last lines quoted. I would not call the other line merely adequate; it is much more than that. Dante's simplicity comes from a penetrating directness of poetic vision, it is not the simplicity of an adequate style."

(3-11-36)

(I don't think Virgil would be classed by you as a psychic poet and yet what is the source of that "majestic sadness" and that word-magic and vision which make his verse, more than that of almost any other poet, fill one with what Belloc calls the sense of the Unknown Country?)

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* "And came from that martyrdom into this peace."
† "As when he pulled Marsyas out of the scabbard of his limbs."

"I don't at all agree that Virgil's verse fills one with the sense of the Unknown Country—he is not in the least a mystic poet, he was too Latin and Roman for that. Majestic sadness, word-magic and vision need not have anything to do with the psychic; the first can come from the Higher Mind and the noble parts of the Vital, the others from almost anywhere. I do not mean to say there was no psychic touch at all anywhere in Virgil. And what is this Unknown Country? There are plenty of Unknown Countries (other than the psychic world) to which many poets give us some kind of access or sense of their existence behind, much more than Virgil. But if when you say verse you mean his rhythm, his surge of word-music, that does no doubt come from somewhere else, much more than the thoughts or the words that are carried on the surge."

(31-3-32)

(I think what Belloc meant in crediting Virgil with the power to give us a sense of the Unknown Country was that Virgil specialises in a kind of wistful vision of things across great distances in space or time, which renders them dream-like and invests them with an air of ideality. He mentions as an instance the passage (perhaps in the second book of the *Aeneid*) where the swimmer sees all Italy from the top of a wave: *Prospexi Italiam summa sublimis ab unda.* I dare say—

Sternitur infelix alienum volnere coelumque
*Adspicit et dulces moriens reminscitur Argos**

as well as

Tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore†—

belong to the same category. To an ordinary Roman Catholic mind like Belloc, which is not conscious of the subtle hierarchy of unseen worlds, whatever is vaguely and remotely appealing—in short, beautifully misty—is mystical, and "revelatory" of the native land of the soul. Add to this that Virgil's rhythm is exquisitely euphonious, and it is no wonder Belloc should feel as if the very harps of heaven were echoed by the Mantuan.

He couples Shakespeare with Virgil as a master of (to quote a phrase of Arjava's) "earth-transforming gramarye." The quotations he gives from Shakespeare struck me as rather peculiar in the context: I don't exactly remember them but something in the style of

Night's tapers are burnt out and jocund day . . .

and of Dawn standing tip-toe upon "yonder western hill" seems to give him a wonderful flash of the Unknown Country!

He also alludes to the four magical lines of Keats about Ruth "amid the alien corn" and Victor Hugo's at-least-for-once truly delicate, unrhetorical passage on the same theme in *Le Legende des Siècles.* I

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* "Unhappy, he fell by a stranger's wound and looked at the sky and, dying, remembered sweet Argos."

† They stretched their hands for love of the other shore" (Flecker's translation).

wonder if you recollect the passage: its last two stanzas are especially enchanting:

Tout reposait dans Ur et dans Jéremadeth;
Les astres émaillaient le ciel profond et sombre;
Le croissant fin et clair parmi ces fleurs de l 'ombre
Brillait à l 'occident, et Ruth se demandait,

. . . . .

Immobile, ouvrant l 'oeil à moitié sous ses voiles.
Quel dieu, quel moissonneur de l 'éternel été
Avait, en s 'en allant, négligemment jeté
*Cette faucille d'or dans le champ des étoiles.**

What do you think of them?)

"If that is Belloc's idea of the mystic, I can't put much value on his Roman Catholic mind! Shakespeare's lines and Hugo's also are good poetry and may be very enchanting, as you say, but there is nothing in the least deep or mystic about them. Night's tapers are the usual poetic metaphor, Hugo's *moissonneur* and *faucille d'or* are an ingenious fancy—there is nothing true behind it, not the least shadow of a mystical experience. The lines quoted from Virgil are exceedingly moving and poetic, but it is pathos of the life plane, not anything more—Virgil would have stared if he had been told that his *ripae ulterioris* was revelatory of the native land of the soul. These sentimental modern intellectuals are terrible: they will read anything into anything; that is because they have no touch on the Truth, so they make up for it by a gambolling fancy." (1-4-32)

(I have written somewhere that Virgil's world-famous line—

Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt—

which you too have praised and considered an Overhead inspiration of the highest, can have the meaning we generally read into it only if the line is taken in isolation from its context. This phenomenon is an interesting one as illustrating how great poetry sometimes works, the inspiration bringing forth effects that are not always an organic part of the passage in which they occur. I am sure you recollect the passage where this line stands:

"Quis jam locus," inquit Achates,
"Quae regio in terris nostri non plena laboris?
En Priamus! sunt hic etiam sua praemia ludi,
Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt . . ."

A recent translator, A. Rushton Fairclough, Englishes it thus: "What land,"

* "All were asleep in Ur and in Jeremadeth; the stars enamelled the deep and sombre sky; the thin clear crescent shone in the West among these flowers of the darkness, and Ruth, standing still and gazing through her half-parted veils, asked herself: 'What god, what reaper of the eternal summer has thrown, while going home, this sickle of gold in the starry field?' "

cried Achates, "what tract on earth is now not full of our sorrow? Lo, Priam! Here, too, virtue has its due reward; here, too, there are tears for misfortune and mortal sorrows touch the heart." I should render the main part: "Here too there is reward for honour, there are tears for earthly things and mortal fortunes touch the heart." In any case, the significance of your phrase—"the touch of tears in mortal things"—summarising that line of Virgil's is not directly present, though I am sure a conscious artist like Virgil must have known the profound suggestion his line would have when detached from its companions. And, by the way, how would you hexametricise the line in English? I have two versions, one more literal than the other:

(1) *Tears are in all things and touched is our heart by the fate of mortals.*

(2) *Haunted by tears is the world; on our heart is the touch of things mortal.*

Which do you fancy?)

"The context of Virgil's line has nothing to do with and cannot detract from its greatness and its Overhead character. If we limit its meaning so as to unify it with what goes before, if we want Virgil to say in it only, "Oh yes, even in Carthage, so distant a place, these foreigners too can sympathise and weep over what has happened in Troy and get touched by human misfortune," then the line will lose all its value and we would only have to admire the strong turn and *recherché* suggestiveness of its expression. Virgil certainly did not mean it like that; he starts indeed by stressing the generality of the fame of Troy and the interest taken everywhere in her misfortunes but then he passes from the particularity of this idea and suddenly rises from it to a feeling of the universality of mortal sorrow and suffering and of the chord of human sympathy and participation which responds to it from all who share that mortality. He rises indeed much higher than that and goes much deeper: he has felt a brooding cosmic sense of these things, gone into the depth of the soul which answers to them and drawn from it the inspired and inevitable language and rhythm which came down to it from above to give this pathetic perception an immortal body. Lines like these seldom depend upon their contexts, they rise from it as if a single Himalayan peak from a range of low hills or even from a flat plain. They have to be looked at by themselves, valued for their own sake, felt in their own independent greatness. Shakespeare's lines upon sleep—

Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge?—

depend not at all upon the context which is indeed almost irrelevant, for he branches off into a violent and resonant description of a storm at sea which has its poetic quality, but that quality has something comparatively

quite inferior, so that these few lines stand quite apart in their unsurpassable magic and beauty. What has happened is that the sudden wings of a supreme inspiration from above have swooped down upon him and abruptly lifted him for a moment to highest heights, then as abruptly dropped him and left him to his own normal resources. One can see him in the lines that follow straining these resources to try and get something equal to the greatness of this flight but failing except perhaps partly for one line only. Or take those lines in Hamlet—

Absent thee from felicity a while
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain.

They arise out of a rapid series of violent melodramatic events but they have a quite different ring from all that surrounds them, however powerful that may be. They come from another plane, shine with another light: the close of the sentence—'to tell my story'—which connects it with the thread of the drama slips down in a quick incline to a lower inspiration. It is not a dramatic interest we feel when we read these lines; their appeal does not arise from the story but would be the same anywhere and in any context. We have passed from the particular to the universal, to a voice from the cosmic self, to a poignant reaction of the soul of man and not of Hamlet alone to the pain and sorrow of this world and its longing for some unknown felicity beyond. Virgil's

O passi graviora, dabit deus his quoque finem
*Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit**

is only incidentally connected with the storm and wreck of the ships of Aeneas; its appeal is separate and universal and for all time; it is again the human soul that is speaking moved by a greater and deeper inspiration of cosmic feeling with the thought only as a mould into which the feeling is poured and the thinking mind only as a passive instrument. This applies to many or most of the distinctly Overhead lines we meet or at least to those which may be called Overhead transmissions. Even the lines that are perfect and absolute, though not from the Overhead, tend to stand out, if not away, from their surroundings. Long passages of high inspiration there are or short poems in which the wing-beats of some surpassing Power and Beauty gleam out amidst flockings of an equal or almost equal radiance of light. But still the absolutely absolute is rare: it is not often that the highest peaks crowd together.

"As to the translations of Virgil's great line I may observe that the English translation you quote repeats the 'here, too' of the previous line and so rivets his high close to its context, thus emphasising unduly the idea of a local interest and maiming the universality. Virgil has put in no such rivetting, he keeps a bare connection from which he immediately slips

* First line: "Fiercer griefs we have suffered; to these too God will give ending" (Sri Aurobindo's translation).
Second line: "All this, perchance, in the future will gladden the heart to remember."

away: his single incomparable line rises sheer and abrupt into the heights both in its thought and in its form out of the sustained Virgilian elegance of what precedes it. The psychological movement by which this happens is not at all mysterious; he speaks first of the local and particular, then in the penultimate line passes to the general—'here too as everywhere where there are human beings are rewards for excellence', and then passes to the universal, to the reaction of all humanity, to all that is human and mortal in a world of suffering. In your prose translation also there are superfluities which limit and lower the significance. Virgil does not say 'tears for earthly things', 'earthly' is your addition; he says nothing about 'mortal fortunes' which makes the whole thing quite narrow. His single word 'rerum' and his single word 'mortalia' admit in them all the sorrow and suffering of the world and all the affliction and misery that beset mortal creatures in this transient and unhappy world, *anityam asukham lokam imam.* The superfluous words bring in a particularising intellectual insistence which impoverishes a great thought and a great utterance. Your first hexametric version is rather poor; the second is much better and the first half is very fine; the second half is good but it is not an absolute hit. I would like to alter it to

Haunted by tears is the world and our hearts by the touch of things mortal.

But this version has a density of colour which is absent from the bare economy and direct force Virgil manages to combine with his subtle and unusual turn of phrase. As for my own translation—'the touch of tears in mortal things'—it is intended not as an accurate and scholastic prose rendering but as a poetic equivalent. I take it from a passage in *Savitri* where the mother of Savitri is lamenting her child's fate and contrasting the unmoved and unfeeling calm of the gods with human suffering and sympathy. I quote from memory,

We sorrow for a greatness that has passed
And feel the touch of tears in mortal things.
Even a stranger's anguish rends my heart,
And this, O Narad, is my well-loved child.

In Virgil's line the two halves are not really two separate ideas and statements; they are one idea with two symmetrical limbs; the meaning and force of 'mortalia tangunt' derives wholly from the 'lacrimae rerum' and this, I think, ought to be brought out if we are to have an adequate poetic rendering. Three capital words, 'lacrimae,' 'mortalia,' 'tangunt,' carry in them in an intimate connection the whole burden of the inner sense; the touch which falls upon the mind from mortal things is the touch of tears, 'lacrimae rerum.' I consider therefore that the touch of tears is there quite directly enough, spiritually, if not syntactically, and that my translation is perfectly justifiable." (29-11-46)

POETIC INTERPRETATION: A PASSAGE IN SHAKESPEARE

(On that famous passage of Shakespeare's—

Our revels now are ended; these our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit shall dissolve;
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep —

would it be legitimate to comment as follows?—"The meaning, on the surface, is that for each of us life will pass away as if it were a dream and what will remain is the sleep of death, an undetailed everlasting rest. But there is a deeper implication: just as the actor-spirits have not been destroyed and only their visible play has vanished while they themselves, seeming to melt into 'thin air', have returned to their unknown realm of consciousness, so too the sleep of death is but an annihilation in appearance —it is really an unknown state which is our original mode of existence. Nor is this all: from the fourth line onward the language and the rhythm serve to evoke by a certain large and deep suggestiveness an intuition of some transcendental God-self—a being, rapt and remote, who experiences through each individual life a dream-interlude between a divine peace and peace, an 'insubstantial pageant' conjured up for a while by its creative imagination between two states of self-absorbed superconsciousness. We are reminded of the Upanishad's description of the mystic trance in which the whole world fades like an illusion and the individual soul enters the supreme Spirit's unfeatured ecstasy of repose. Shakespeare's intuition is not pure Upanishad, the supreme Spirit is not clearly felt and whatever profundity is there is vague and unintentional; still, a looming mystic light does appear, stay a little, find a suggestive contour before receding and falling away to a music sublimely defunctive.")

"I don't think Shakespeare had any such idea in his mind. What he is dwelling on is the insubstantiality of the world and of human existence. '*We* are such stuff' does not point to any God-self. 'Dream' and 'sleep'

would properly imply Somebody who dreams and sleeps, but the two words are merely metaphors. Shakespeare is not an intellectual or philosophic thinker nor a mystic one. All that you can say is that there comes out here an impression or intimation of the illusion of Maya, the dream-character of life, but without any vision or intimation of what is behind the dream and the illusion. There is nothing in the passage that even hints vaguely the sense of something abiding—all is insubstantial, 'into air, into thin air', 'baseless fabric', 'insubstantial pageant', '*we* are such stuff as dreams are made on.' 'Stuff' points to some inert material rather than a spirit dreamer or sleep. Of course one can always read things into it for one's own pleasure, but..." (8-3-35)

(I admit that Shakespeare was not a philosophic or mystic thinker; also that he had no wish to mysticise in this passage. But is great poetry always a matter of one's conscious intention?—do not unconscious or accidental effects occur which have implications beyond the poet's personal aim or at least unrealised in full by him? A genuinely mystic accident of a high order is the quotation I sent you some days back—

the prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come.

If we take this in connection with Prospero's lines we may have not only an intuition of the illusion of Maya but also that of an abiding something behind the illusory appearance: the word "dream" common to the two passages is extremely suggestive. But as Shakespeare was not a systematic thinker it might not be right to construct like this a philosophy of any sort. And in my essay I do not wish to do so. What, however, surprises me is your saying that there is not the vaguest hint of something abiding. In the magic performance which Prospero gave to Ferdinand and Miranda it was spirits that produced a simulacrum of material reality—a very convincing simulacrum and the young lovers must have been quite taken in, until Prospero reminded them of what he had said before—namely, that "these our actors... were all spirits." They melt into thin air but do not disappear from existence, from conscious being of some character however unearthly: they just become invisible and what disappears is the visible pageant produced by them, a seemingly material construction which yet was a mere phantom. From this seeming, Prospero catches the suggestion that all that looks material is like a phantom, a dream, which must vanish, leaving no trace. But as the actor-spirits are not destroyed with the fabric of their visionary pageant, the terms "baseless" and "insubstantial" assume a meaning not quite what you give them. They mean that the pageant has no basis in materiality, in substantiality as opposed to spirit-nature; and by "*we* are such stuff as dreams are made on" the outer human earthly personalities are regarded as dreamlike, as having no permanent basis of material reality. I may be going beyond the premises in speaking of a God-self, but, all things considered, what

strikes me as *analogically* implicit in the passage is that "we" and earth-existence are projected as a visionary pageant by some immaterial being or beings. I can't exactly say whether spirits akin to Ariel and his crew are implied or some superconscious God-self; but a general implication of occult if not mystic reality responsible for the pageant of human life and earth-existence seems to me inescapable. If pressed to choose on the side either of occult or of mystic implication, I would incline towards the latter: the intuition of Maya is so strong that the implicit significance may very well be some vague shadow of its Upanishadic complement, and the word "sleep" may be a far hint of some rapt, remote, self-absorbed super-consciousness. The whole thing is vague and far-looming because in Shakespeare's case a mystic inspiration would be mostly accidental and his was not a mind as would transmit it easily. The difficulty would be increased since this inspiration was mystic rather in the Indian than the Christian way. Only in that line and a half about the prophetic soul did an ultra-Christian mystic intuition come out more or less explicit—a miracle not to be expected always.

I may be quite at fault in all this complex impression and if you tell me again after considering the points I have broached that it is absolutely off the mark I shall at once scrap it.)

"One can read anything into anything. But Shakespeare says nothing about the material world or there being a base somewhere else or of our being projected into a dream. He says, 'We *are* such stuff'. The spirits vanish into air, into thin air, as Shakespeare emphasises by repetition, which means to any plain interpretation that they too are unreal, only dream-stuff; he does not say that they disappear from view but are there behind all the time. The whole stress is on the unreality and insubstantiality of existence, whether of a pageant or of the spirits or of ourselves—there is no stress anywhere, no mention or hint of an eternal spiritual existence. Shakespeare's idea here as everywhere is the expression of a mood of the vital mind, it is not a reasoned philosophical conclusion. However, if you like to argue that, logically, this or that is the true philosophical consequence of what Shakespeare says and that therefore the Daemon who inspired him must have meant that, I have no objection. I am simply interpreting the passage as Shakespeare's transcribing mind has put it."

(9-3-35)

(Just a word more about that passage. If it is taken *in vacuo*, there is no internal justification for my idea which turns on the survival of the spirits after the pageant has faded. But almost immediately after the stage indication: "... to a strange, hollow and confused noise, they heavily vanish", occurs this aside on the part of Prospero: (To the Spirits) "Well done; avoid; no more." The quoted passage follows a little later. Then again Prospero says after Ferdinand and Miranda are gone: "Come with

a thought: — I thank you: — Ariel, come." Thereupon Ariel enters.

Ariel: *Thy thoughts I cleave to. What's thy pleasure?*

Prospero: *Spirit,*

We must prepare to meet with Caliban.

What do you make of all this? And when Ariel reports how he has lured Prospero's enemies into a "foul lake", Prospero commends him:

This was well done, my bird.

Thy shape invisible retain thou still.

Still later, comes another stage-direction: "A noise of hunters heard. Enter divers Spirits, in shape of hounds...; Prospero and Ariel setting them on." Even if this is taken to refer to Spirits other than those who produce that masque, the previous quotations are sufficient to prove that only the visible shapes and formations vanished—the entities themselves remained behind all the time.

To echo Dilip: *"Qu'en dites vous?"*)

"I don't see what all that has to do with the meaning of the passage in question which plainly insists that nothing endures. Obviously Ariel had an invisible shape—invisible to human eyes, but the point of the passage is that all shapes and substances and beings disappear into nothingness. We are concerned with Prospero's meaning, not with what actually happened to the spirits or for that matter to the pageant in total which we might conceive also of having an invisible source or material. He uses the disappearance of the pageant and the spirits as a base for the idea that all existence is an illusion—it is the idea of the illusion that he enforces. If he had wanted to say, 'We disappear, all disappears to view but the reality of us and of all things persists in a greater immaterial reality', he would surely have said so or at least not left it to be inferred or reasoned out by you in the twentieth century. I repeat, however, that this is my view of Shakespeare's meaning and does not affect any possibility of reading into it something that Shakespeare's outer mind did not receive or else did not express." (10-3-35)

SOME VERBAL SUBTLETIES AND TECHNICALITIES

(Is there any advantage in changing the phrase—

as though a press
Of benediction lay on me unseen—

to

as though the press
Of a benediction lay on me unseen?)

"No, no. The first was immeasurably better. 'A press of benediction' is striking and effective; 'the press of a benediction' is flat and means nothing. Besides, it is not good English. You can say 'a press of affairs', 'a press of matter'; you can say 'the pressure of this affair,' but you cannot say 'the press of an affair'."

(1931)

(As between the forms—"with a view to express" and "with a view to expressing"—the Concise Oxford Dictionary calls the former vulgar.)

"I don't agree with Oxford. Both forms are used. If 'to express' is vulgar, 'to expressing' is cumbrous and therefore inelegant."

(The Oxford Dictionary seems to leave one no choice as regards counting the number of syllables in the word "vision" and its likes. I quote below some of the words explained as monosyllables in the same way as "Rhythm" and "prism":

Fa'shion (-shn)
Passion (pa'-shn)
Pri'son (-zn)
Scission (si'shn)
Trea'son (-ēzn)
Vi'sion (-zhn)

As Dilip would say, *qu'en dites vous?* Chambers's Dictionary makes "vision" a dissyllable, which is quite sensible, but the monosyllablic pronunciation of it deserves to be considered at least a legitimate variant when H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler—the name of Fowler is looked upon as a synonym for authority on the English language—give no other. I don't think I am mistaken in interpreting their intention. Take "realm", which they pronounce in brackets as relm; now I see no difference as regards syllabification between their intention here and in the instances above.

P.S. I must admit, however, what struck me after typing the preceding. In the preface to the Oxford Dictionary it is said that it has not been thought necessary to mention certain pronunciations which are familiar to the normal reader, such as that of the suffix -ation (āshn). Does this mean that a word like "meditation" is to be taken as three syllables only? According to my argument there seems no alternative; and yet the example looks very much like a *reductio ad absurdum*.)

"You may not have a choice—but I have a choice, which is to pronounce and scan words like vision and passion and similar words as all the poets of the English language (those at least whom I know) have consistently pronounced and scanned them—as dissyllables. If you ask me to scan Shakespeare's line in the following manner to please H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler,

u — u — u — — u —
In mai|den med|itation | fan|cy free,

I shall decline without thanks. Shakespeare wrote, if I remember right, 'treasons, strategems and spoils'; Shelley, Tennyson, any poet of the English language, I believe, would do the same—though I have no books with me to give chapter and verse. I lived in both northern and southern England, but I never heard vision pronounced vizhn, it was always vizhun; treason, of course, is pronounced trēz'n, but that does not make it a monosyllable in scansion because there is in these words a very perceptible slurred vowel sound in pronunciation which I represent by the ' ; in poison also. If realm, helm etc. are taken as monosyllables, that is quite reasonable, for there is no vowel between l and m and none is heard, slurred or otherwise in pronunciation. The words rhythm and prism are technically monosyllables, because they are so pronounced in French (i.e. that part of the word, for there is a mute e in French): but in fact most Englishmen take the help of a slurred vowel-sound in pronouncing rhythms and it would be quite permissible to write in English as a blank verse line, 'The unheard rhythms that sustain the world'.

"This is my conviction and not all the Fowlers in the world will take it away from me. I only hope the future lexicographers will not 'fowl' the language any more in that direction; otherwise we shall have to write lines like this—

O vizhn! O pashn! O fashn! m'd'tashn! h'rr'p'lashn!
Why did the infern'l Etern'l und'take creash'n?
Or else, creat'ng, could he not have afford'd
Not to allow the Engl'sh tongue to be Oxford'd?

P.S. I remember a book (Hamerton's? some one else's? I don't remember) in which the contrast was drawn between the English and French languages, that the English tongue tended to throw all the weight on the first or earliest possible syllable and slurred the others, the French did the opposite—so that when an Englishman pretends to say straw-

berries, what he really says is strawb's. That is the exaggeration of a truth—but all the same there is a limit." (27-9-34)

(Of course a language is not made altogether according to logical rules. Originally, or aboriginally, it came, I suppose, out of the entrails and in spite of all Volapuks and Esperantos natural languages will flourish. But I should like to ask you a few questions suggested by your falling foul of the Fowlers. The poetic pronunciation of words cannot be accepted as a standard for current speech—can it? On your own showing, "treason" and "poison" which are monosyllables in prose or current speech can be scanned as dissyllables in verse; Shelley makes "evening" three syllables and Harin has used even "realm" as a dissyllable, while the practice of taking "precious" and "conscious" to be three syllables is not even noticeable, I believe. All the same, current speech, if your favourite Chambers's Dictionary as well as my dear Oxford Concise is to be believed, insist on "evening", "precious" and "conscious" being dissyllabic and "realm" monosyllabic. I am mentioning this disparity between poetic and current usages not because I wish "meditation" to be robbed of its full length or "vision" to lose half its effect but because it seems to me that Shelley's or Tennyson's or any poet's practice does not in itself prove anything definitely for English as it is spoken. And spoken English, very much more than written English, undergoes change; even the line you quote from Shakespeare was perhaps not scanned in his time as you would do it now, for "meditation"—as surely "passion" and "fashion" also and most probably "vision" as well—was often if not always given its full vowel-value and the fourth foot of the line in question might to an Elizabethan ear have been very naturally an anapaest:

u u —
In mai|den me|dita|tion fan|cy free.

When, however, you say that your personal experience in England, both north and south, never recorded a monosyllabic "vision", we are on more solid ground, but the Concise Oxford Dictionary is specially stated to be in its very title as "of Current English": is all its claim to be set at nought? It is after all a responsible compilation and, so far as my impression goes, not unesteemed. If its errors were so glaring as you think, would there not have been a general protest? Or is it that English has changed so much in "word of mouth" since your departure from England? This is not an ironical query—I am just wondering.

P.S. Your exclamatory-interrogatory elegiacs illustrating the predicament we should fall into if the Fowlers were allowed to spread their nets with impunity were very enjoyable. But I am afraid the tendency of the English language is towards contraction of vowel-sounds, at least terminal ones; and perhaps the Oxford Dictionary has felt the need to monumentalise —clearly and authoritatively—the degree to which this tendency has, in

some cases more definitely, in others less but still perceptibly enough, advanced? The vocalised "e" of the suffix -ed of the Spenserian days is now often mute; the trisyllabic suffix -ation of the "spacious times" has shrunk by one syllable, and "treason" and "poison" and "prison", all having the same second-vowel sound if fully pronounced as in the second syllable of -ation, are already monosyllables in speech—so, that "passion and "fashion" which too have lost their Elizabethan characteristic like "meditation" should contract by a natural analogy, carrying all "ation"-suffixed words as well as "vision" and "scission" and the like with them, looks quite as one might expect. And if current speech once fixes these contractions, they will not always keep outside the pale of poetry. What do you think?)

"Where the devil have I admitted that 'treason' and 'poison' are monosyllables or that their use as dissyllables is a poetic licence? Will you please quote the words in which I have made that astounding and imbecile admission? I have said distinctly that they are dissyllabic,—like risen, dozen, maiden, garden, laden and a thousand others which nobody (at least before the world went mad) ever dreamed of taking as monosyllables. On my own showing, indeed! After I had even gone to the trouble of explaining at length about the slurred syllable e in these words, for the full sound is not given, so that you cannot put it down as pronounced maid-en, you have to indicate the pronunciation as maid'n. But for that to dub maiden a monosyllable and assert that Shakespeare, Shelley and every other poet who scans maiden as a dissyllable was a born fool who did not know the 'current' pronunciation or was indulging in a constant poetic licence whenever he used the words garden, maiden, widen, sadden etc. is a long flight of imagination. I say that these words are dissyllables and the poets in so scanning them (not as an occasional licence but normally and every time) are much better authorities than any owl—or fowl—of a dictionary maker in the universe. Of course the poets use licences in lengthening out words occasionally, but these are exceptions; to explain away their normal use of words as a perpetually repeated licence would be a wild wooden-headedness (5 syllables, please). That these words are dissyllables is proved farther by the fact that 'saddened,' 'maidenhood' cannot possibly be anything but respectively dissyllabic and trisyllabic, yet 'saddened' could, I suppose, be correctly indicated in a dictionary as pronounced 'saddnd'. A dictionary indication or a dictionary theory cannot destroy the living facts of the language.

"I do not know why you speak of my 'favourite' Chambers. Your attachment to Oxford is not balanced by any attachment of mine to Chambers or any other lexicographer. I am not inclined to swear by any particular dictionary as an immaculate virgin authority for pronunciation or a papal Infallible. It was you who quoted Chambers as differing from Oxford, not I. You seem indeed to think that the Fowlers are a sort of double-headed Pope to the British public in all linguistic matters and nobody could

dare question their dictates or ukases—only I do so because I am antiquated and am living in India. I take leave to point out to you that this is not yet a universally admitted catholic dogma. The Fowlers indeed seem to claim something of the kind, they make their enunciations with a haughty papal arrogance condemning those who differ from them as outcasts and brushing them aside in a few words or without a mention. But it is not quite like that. What is current English? As far as pronunciation goes, every Englishman knows that for an immense number of words there is no such thing—Englishmen of equal education pronounce them in different ways, sometimes in more than two different ways. 'Either'-neither' is a current pronunciation, so is 'eether' 'neether'. In some words the 'th' is pronounced variably as a soft 'd' or a soft 't' or as 'th'—and so on. If the Oxford pronunciation of 'vision' and 'meditation' is correct current English, then the confusion has much increased since my time, for then at least everybody pronounced 'vizhun', 'meditashun', as I do still and shall go on doing so. Or if the other existed, it must have been confined to uneducated people. But you suggest that my pronunciation is antiquated, English has advanced since then as since Shakespeare. But I must point out that you yourself quote Chambers for 'vizhun' and following your example—not out of favouritism—I may quote him for 'summation'—'summashun', not 'shn'. The latest edition of Chambers is dated 1931 and the editors have not thought themselves bound by the decisive change of the English language to change 'shun' into 'shn'. Has the decisive change taken place since 1931? Moreover in the recent dispute about the standard Broadcast pronunciation, the decisions of Bernard Shaw's Committee were furiously disputed—if Fowler and Oxford were papal authorities in England for current speech (it was current speech the Committee was trying to fix through the broadcasts), would it not have been sufficient simply to quote the Oxford in order to produce an awed and crushed silence?

"So your P.S. has no solid ground to stand on since there is no 'fixed' current speech and Fowler is not its Pope and there is no universal currency of his vizhn of things. Language is not bound by analogy and because
uu
'meditation' has become 'meditashun' it does not follow that it must become 'meditashn' and that 'tation' is now a monosyllable contrary to all common sense and the privilege of the ear. It might just as well be argued that it will necessarily be clipped farther until the whole word becomes a monosyllable. Language is neither made nor developed in that way—if the English language were so to deprive itself of all beauty by turning vision into vizhn and then into vzhn and all other words into similar horrors, I would hasten to abandon it for Sanskrit or French or Bengali—or even Swahili.

"P.S. By the way, one point. Does the Oxford pronounce in cold blood and so many set words that vision, passion (and by logical extension treason, maiden, garden etc.) are monosyllables? Or is it your inference

from 'realm' and 'prism'? If the latter, I would only say, 'Beware' of too rigidly logical inferences. If the former, I can only say that Oxford needs some gas from Hitler to save the English mind from its pedants. This quite apart from the currency of vizhns. (20-9-34)

(I am sincerely sorry for mistaking you on an important point. But before my argumentative wooden-headedness gives up the ghost under your sledge hammer it is bursting to cry a Themistoclean "Strike, but hear." Please try to understand my misunderstanding. What you wrote was: " 'Treason' of course is pronounced 'trēz'n', but that does not make it a monosyllable in scansion because there is in these words a very perceptible slurred vowel sound in pronunciation which I represent by the ' ; in 'poison' also." I think it must have been the word "scansion" which led me astray—as if you had meant that these words were non-monosyllabic in poetry only. But am I really misjudging Chambers as well as the Fowlers when I draw the logical inference that, since a dictionary is no dictionary if it does not follow a coherent system and since these people absolutely omit to make any distinction between the indicated scansion of "prism", "realm", "rhythm" etc. and that of "treason" and poison", they definitely mean us to take all these words as monosyllables? If Chambers who writes 'vizhun' but 'trēzn' and 'poizn' just as he writes "relm" and "rithm", intends us to understand that there is some difference between the scansions of the latter pairs he, in my opinion, completely de-dictionaries his work by so illogical an expectation. He and the Fowlers may not say in cold blood and so many set words that "treason" and "poison" are monosyllables but it is their design, in most freezing blood and more eloquently than words can express, that they should fall into the same category as "realm" and "rhythm". Else, what could have prevented them from inventing some such sign as your ' to mark the dissimilarity? My sin was to have loved logic not wisely but too well where logicality had been obstreperously announced in flaring capitals on the title page and throughout the whole book by a fixed system of spelling and pronunciation. My Othellolike extremity of love plunged me into abysmal errors, but oh the Iagoistic "motiveless malignity" of lexicographers!

I am grateful to you for disabusing my mind of its trust in these self-appointed Popes. Your contentions I accept: I also see that the beauty of the English language is at stake when these Fowlers and their ilk start their word-clipping business. You could at least turn to Sanskrit or French or Bengali, but I without English would be quieter than the grave.)

"It seemed to me impossible that even the reckless Fowler—reckless in the excess of his learning—should be so audacious as to announce that this large class of words accepted as dissyllables from the beginning of (English) time were really monosyllables. After all, the lexicographers do not set out to give the number of syllables in a word. Pronounciation is

a different matter. Realm cannot be a dissyllable unless you violently make it so, because l is a liquid like r and you cannot make a dissyllable of words like 'charm', unless you Scotchify the English language and make it char'r'r'm or vulgarise it and make it charrum—and even char'r'r'm is after all a monosyllable. Prism, the ism in Socialism and pessimism, rhythm can be made dissyllabic; but by convention (convention has nothing to do with these things) the ism, rhythm are treated as a single syllable, because of the etymology. But there is absolutely no reason to bring in this convention with treason, poison, garden or maiden (coming from French *trahison, poison* and some O.E. equivalent of the German *garten, madchen*). The dictionaries give the same mark of pronunciation for thm, sm and the den (dn) of maiden and son (sn) of treason because they are phonetically the same. The French pronounce rhythme=reethm (I make English sound indications) without anything to help them out in passing from th to m, but the English tongue can't do that, there is a very perceptible quarter vowel or one-eighth vowel sound between th and m—if it were not so the plural rhythms would be unpronounceable. I remember in my French class at St. Paul's our teacher (a Frenchman) insisted on our pronouncing *ordre* in the French way—in his mouth orrdrr; I was the only one who succeeded, the others all made it auder, orrder, audrer, or some such variation. There is the same difference of habit with words like rhythm, and yet conventionally the French treatment is accepted so far as to impose rhythm as a monosyllable. Realm on the other hand is pronounced truly as a monosyllable without the help of any fraction of a vowel." (30-9-34)

(Why have you bucked at my "azúre" as a line-ending? And why so late in the day? Twice before I have used the same inversion and it caused no alarm. Simple poetic licence, sir. If Wordsworth could write

What awful pérspective; while from our sight . . .

and leave no reverberation of "awful" in the reader's mind, and if Abercrombie boldly come out with

To smite the horny eyes of men
With the renown of our Heaven

and our horny eyes remain unsmitten by his topsyturvy "Heaven"—why, then, I need not feel too shy to shift the accent of "azure" just because of poor me happening to be an Indian. Not that an alternative line getting rid of that word is impossible—quite a fine one can be written with "obscure". But why does this particular inversion shock you? There is nothing un-English or unpoetic about it—so far as I can see, though of course such things should not be done often. What do you say?

Your "through whom" in place of my "wherethrough" in another line is an improvement, but it is difficult to reject that word as a legal archaism inadmissible in good poetry. Your remark about "whereas" in my AE. essay seemed to me just in pointing out the obscurity of connection it intro-

duced between the two parts of my sentence, but the term itself has no stigma on it of obsolescence as for instance "whenas": in poetry it would be rather prosaic, while "wherethrough" is a special poetic usage as any big dictionary will tell us, and in certain contexts it would be preferable to "through which", just as "whereon", "wherein", and "whereby" would sometimes be better than their ordinary equivalents. I wonder why you have become so ultra-modern: I remember you jibbing also at "from out" —a phrase which has not fallen into desuetude yet, and can be used occasionally even in a common context: e.g. "from out the bed".)

"I can swallow 'pérspective' with some difficulty, but if anybody tried to justify by it a line like this (let us say in a poem to Miss Mayo):

O ínspectór, why súggestive of drains?

I would buck. I disapprove totally of Abercrombie's bold wriggle with Heaven, but even he surely never meant to put the accent on the second syllable and pronounce it Hevénn. I absolutely refuse to pronounce 'azure' as 'azúre'. 'Perspective' can just be managed by making it practically atonal or unaccented or evenly accented, which comes to the same thing. 'Sapphire' can be managed at the end of a line, e.g. "stróng sapphire", because 'phire' is long and the voice trails over it, but the 'ure' of 'azure' is more slurred into shortness than trailed out into length as if it were 'azyoore'.

"I didn't suggest that 'whereas' was obsolete. It is a perfectly good word in its place, e.g. He pretended the place was empty whereas in reality it was crowded, packed, overflowing; but its use as a loose conjunctive turn which can be conveniently shoved into any hole to keep two sentences together is altogether reprehensible. None of these words is obsolete, but 'wherethrough' is rhetorically pedantic, just as 'whereabout' or 'wherewithal' would be. It is no use throwing the dictionary at my head—the dictionary admits many words which poetry refuses to admit. Of course you can drag any word in the dictionary into poetry if you like, e.g.:

My spirit parenthetically wise
Gave me its obiter dictum; à propos
I looked within with weird and brilliant eyes
And found in the pit of my stomach the juste mot.

But all that is possible is not commendable. So if you seek a pretext wherethrough to bring in these heavy visitors I shall buck and seek a means whereby to eject them.

"P.S. It is not to the use of 'azure' in place of an iamb in the last foot that I object but to your blessed accent on the last syllable. I will even, if you take that sign off, allow you to rhyme 'azure' with 'pure' and pass it off as an Abercrombiean acrobacy by way of fun. But not otherwise—the accent mark must go." (2-10-36)

ERRATUM

The correct form of the first Question and Answer on page 10 is:

(You have said: "Always behave as if the Mother was looking at you; because she is, indeed, always present,"—does Mother know all our insignificant thoughts at all times or only when she concentrates?)

"It is said that the Mother is always present and looking at you. This does not mean that in her physical mind she is thinking of you always and seeing your thoughts. There is no need of that, since she is everywhere and acts everywhere out of her universal knowledge." (12-8-33)

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